

# Aufheben

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**A phenomenal anti-war movement?**

**Théorie Communiste: A reply**

**Review article: *Hotlines***

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The movement against the war on Iraq was larger and more exciting than other recent anti-war movements. This article focuses on the organization and character of the movement in the UK, and describes how some of the dynamics of the movement as a whole were played out in one UK town, where we were involved. We argue that the feeling that what happened was challenging lay not so much in the nature of the actions, but rather in the number and variety of people brought into the movement and in the failure of the liberal peace movement to exercise the usual control.

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In our last issue, we carried an article by the French group *Théorie Communiste* (TC) which offered a critique of our articles on decadence theory. Like ourselves, for TC the theory of the ultra-left is a basic reference point and at the same time something which we attempt to go beyond. TC argued that we fail to escape the classic ultra-left objectivism-subjectism problematic. In our reply, we acknowledge some of their criticisms, but question features of their own analysis, in particular their distinction between 'early' and 'late' Marx, and their periodization of capital in terms of the real and formal subsumption of labour to capital.

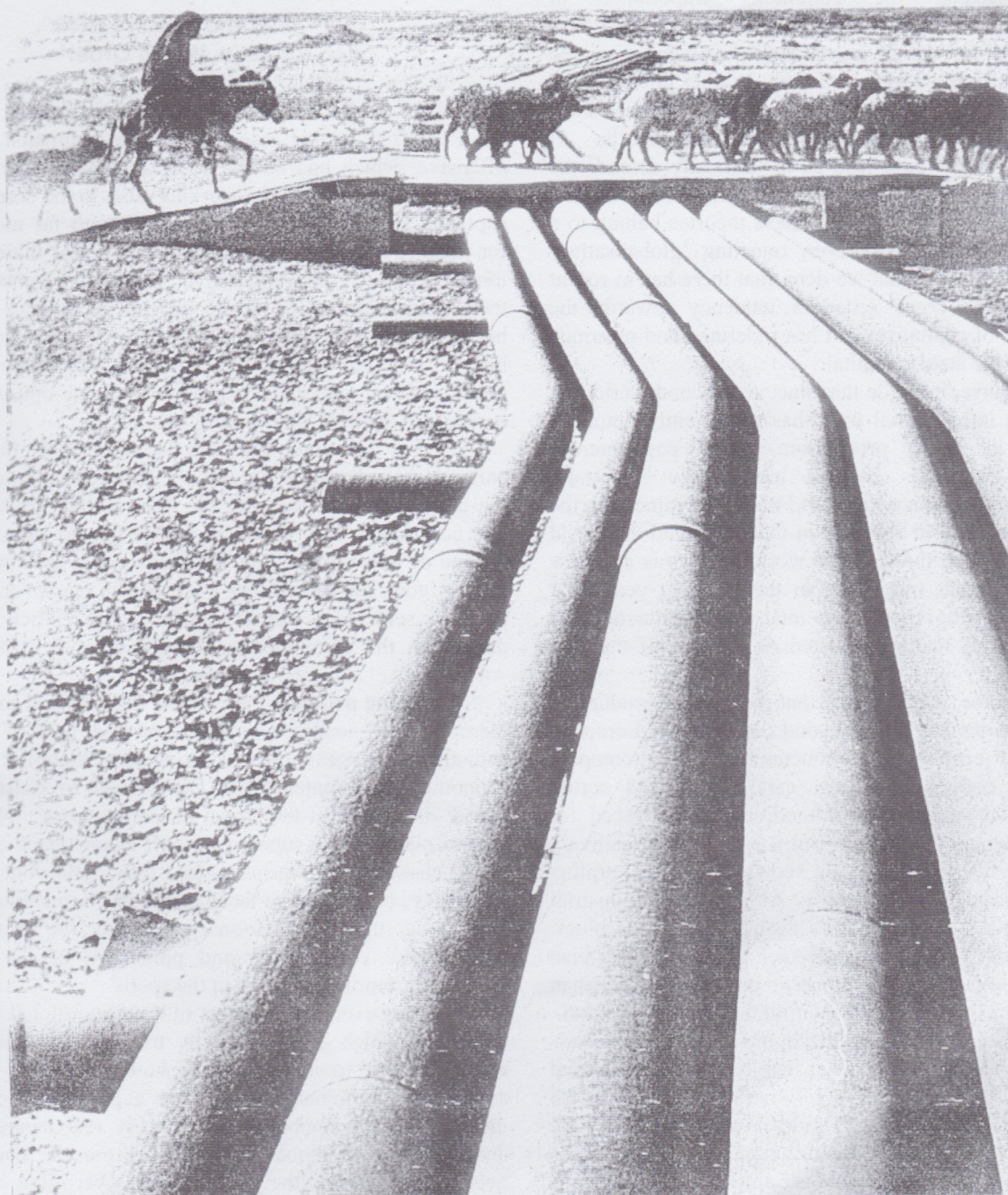
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For the last three years, the German collective Kolinko have been engaged in a project of workers' inquiry. Researching class struggle (or lack of it) through working in call centres, Kolinko locate their project in the tradition of *operaismo*, and argue for workers' inquiry as a key strategy for revolutionaries today. This article addresses some of the issues thrown up by the tension between inquiry and intervention, including the question as to the role (if any) for 'revolutionary' groups.



# Oil Wars and World Orders New and Old



## Introduction

The American-led interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s were presented as 'humanitarian wars'. With the widespread, if not always universal, support of the 'international (bourgeois) community', the liberal apologists for such wars were able to claim that they were being waged to uphold the universal norms of the 'civilised world' that now overrode the old principles of national sovereignty. The conflicting material interests underlying these military adventures were far from apparent.

In stark contrast, it was hard to disguise the fact that the invasion of Iraq was primarily motivated by a drive to reassert American power, and in particular its control over

the world's oil supplies. In the face of naked American imperialism, which was determined to take Iraqi oil by force, the 'international (bourgeois) community' was openly split between those who sought to oppose the US and those who favoured a policy of appeasement.

As a consequence, the fashionable talk about 'globalisation', of the emergence of a unified 'transnational bourgeoisie', of an all embracing yet amorphous 'Empire', and of the terminal decline of the nation state has been shoved to one side. The need to understand the geo-politics of the current epoch of capitalism in terms of imperialism and the relation between nation states and 'national capitals' has reasserted itself.



We do not propose to enter into a detailed discussion here concerning theories of globalisation and imperialism. However, it is necessary to make a few preliminary points and observations.

Recognising the continuing importance of imperialism and the nation state does not mean that we return to the classical theories of capitalist imperialism associated with Lenin, Bukharin and Luxemburg. Neither does it mean that we accept the anti-imperialist conclusions that have often been drawn from these classical theories of imperialism, which would lead us to 'critically defend' the 'weaker' capitalist states against the 'stronger'. Whatever their merits, and whatever their errors, these theories belong to a past era of capitalism. However, rejecting 'globalisation' theories does not mean that we deny that there has in recent decades been, in some sense, a tendency towards the 'globalisation' of capitalism that has redefined and reformed the relation of the state to capital.

Of course, it is true that since the second world war the growth in international trade has consistently outpaced the growth in world production. As a consequence, international trade has become increasingly important. However, after the collapse in world trade that came with the break down in the gold-standard in the 1920s and the world slump in the 1930s, the level of world trade was at a low point. Indeed, it has only been in the last few years that world trade as a proportion of the total world production has reached the levels that had existed on the eve of the first world war.

Of course, it is also true that the scale of production in many industries has gone beyond the limits of European sized national economies. Production of many complex manufactured commodities (e.g. cars) are spread across national frontiers and such commodities are produced for more than one national market. But it is only in a relatively few industries that the production and realisation of surplus-value has reached a global scale. At most the 'industrial circuits of capital' are confined to distinct continental blocs. Even in a relatively open economy such as the UK more than two thirds of output is for the domestic market and more than half of what is exported remains within the European Union.

Since the 1970s the development of world money-markets has given rise to what we have termed global finance capital. Vast flows of largely fictitious capital, which dwarf the value of international trade, now swish around the world. This growth of global finance capital undoubtedly has led to growing interconnections amongst the world's bourgeoisie and ruling classes as the ownership of surplus value and the direction of its capitalisation have become increasingly internationalised. Nevertheless the ownership and control of most major transnational corporations are concentrated in one country. Furthermore, despite the emergence of supra-national organisations of 'global governance', the nation state remains the principal centre for the political organisation of capital necessary for the mediation of class conflict and for the securing the social and economic conditions for capital accumulation. Thus, despite the 'globalisation of capital', we can still talk about various national bourgeoisies, organised around particular nation states, with their own distinctive interests and policies.

Any understanding of the current geo-politics of world capitalism must therefore be in terms of the relations between nation states determined by the underlying tension

between the globalisation of finance capital and the far more limited internationalisation of the production and realisation of surplus-value.

### **The Fall of the Eastern Bloc and the 'New World Order'**

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1988 opened up the prospect of a unified global capitalism. The capitalist counter offensive, which had sought to outflank and break up the entrenched positions of the working class in the core western capitalist economies, now found itself with far more room for manoeuvre. With the end of the cold war there was no longer any overriding military or ideological constraints to the full implementation of the neo-liberal policies that had been pioneered by Thatcher and Reagan. With the 'end of history' and the triumph of liberalism and 'free market' capitalism, all national economies had no option but to compete in the new 'global markets'.

In the core capitalist countries of the West, particularly in Western Europe, the 'modernising' factions of the bourgeoisie, armed with the 'free market' triumphalism that accompanied the break up of the Eastern Bloc and the demise of 'actually existing socialism', could now press with fresh vigour for the rolling back of the social democratic post-war settlements and the rigidities and restrictions these placed on the competitiveness and profitability of capital.

In the periphery, the end of the cold war meant that there was no longer any need, on the part of western capitalism, to tolerate the various forms of state-led 'national economic development' that had served to bolster 'third world' states against the 'threat of Communism'. No longer able to play the two superpowers off against each other, the ruling classes of the periphery had little option but to allow themselves become mere local agents of international capital - opening up their nations assets to the plunder of transnational corporations and predations of the western bankers in return for a share in the spoils.

However, the prospect of a unified global capitalist utopia, in which an increasingly transnational bourgeoisie would be free to make a profit how and where it liked, assisted by compliant nation states eager to attract capital investment, was tempered by the very real danger of the disintegration of global capitalism. From the end of the Second World War the common and overriding 'threat of Communism' had served to contain rivalries amongst the western imperialist powers. During the long cold war each nation state in the West had been prepared to compromise their immediate interests in order to maintain western unity. With the fall of the eastern Bloc this was no longer the case.

Following the German and Japanese economic miracles of the 1960s there had been a distinct tendency for the break up of western capitalism into three distinct economic blocs centred around the USA, Germany and Japan. However, despite the economic integration of Western Europe within the European Union, this tendency had always been held in check by the common military threat posed by the USSR. With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and Comecon, the way was open for Eastern Europe to be integrated into a German centred European Union, which would displace the US as the world's largest market and



which would also provide German industry with a cheap but highly trained workforce. In Asia the increasing volumes of Japanese foreign investment, which had greatly increased since the rise of the Yen in second half of the 1980s, could be seen as further evidence of the consolidation of an Asian Bloc around Japan.

However, the only state power with the global reach capable of securing a new global order against 'rogue states' and popular resistance to the destabilising effects of an unrestrained 'global capitalism' was that of the USA. Yet, with the fall of the USSR, there re-emerged powerful isolationist tendencies within the US bourgeoisie that were reluctant for the USA to take up the burden of 'world policeman'.

*The re-emergence of isolationism and the end of the cold war*

The USA's rapid industrialisation in the late nineteenth century had been made possible by the insularity of its economy from the dominance of British manufacturing in the world market. Sheltered by its distance from Britain and protected by high tariff barriers, America's continental-wide economy had provided ample room, and a plentiful supply of raw materials, necessary for the development of the modern large scale capitalist industry of the age.

Against the calls for free trade, and the gold standard, and hence integration into the world market, advocated by the political establishment and bankers of the East Coast then represented by the Democratic Party, large sections of the American industrial bourgeoisie had allied themselves with petit-bourgeois producers and small farmers of the West to form a strong tradition of Populist isolationism in US politics. Even in the 1920s and 30s, when the US had become the most advanced capitalist economy in the world, and had little to fear from free trade and foreign competition, isolationism remained a potent political force. Isolationism was able to overcome the attempts to develop the more liberal and active foreign policy pursued by President Woodrow Wilson, which had led to the USA's intervention in World War I and which had culminated in America's leading role in the formation of the League of Nations.

It was only after World War II that this isolationist tradition was submerged as the American bourgeoisie were mobilised against the 'world-wide threat of Communism'. Even then isolationist tendencies were not entirely eliminated. During the period of *detente* in the 1970s many European leaders had feared isolationist tendencies in America would lead to the US disengagement from Europe. With the decline and fall of the USSR the way was open for a resurgence of US isolationism.

Of course, the economy of the USA in the late 1980s was very different from what it had been 50 years earlier. The growth of world trade and international capital flows, dominated by mostly American banks and multinationals, in the decades following the World War II had meant that the accumulation of American capital was far more interdependent with capital accumulation elsewhere in the world than it had been during the inter-war years. With investments of American capital across the western world, the US state could not so easily disentangle itself from its commitments as the sole world super-power. Nevertheless, faced with the huge costs of maintaining the global reach of

US military and geo-political dominance, a substantial coalition could be built around the demand for the minimization of the US foreign policy involvement beyond North and South America.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Despite the opening up the US economy since the Second World War, the continued insularity of the American population, and indeed large parts of the bourgeoisie, has a firm economic foundation. The USA is a huge continental-wide economy, which, with Central and South America, has a well established hinterland that has ample reserves of raw materials and cheap labour. While the scale of production of many manufacturing industries has outgrown the confines of the European size nation state, only the largest industrial capitals produce and sell on a truly global scale. The horizons of most American industries are amply circumscribed by the New World of the Americas - which constitutes by far the largest market in the world.

US exports of goods account for only 8% of its GDP (OECD Survey 2000). The USA's main trading partners are Canada and Mexico. Trade with these two countries combined is greater than that with the entire European Union. Indeed, more than 95% of 'goods and services' produced in the USA are sold within the Americas.

Moreover, whereas the total value of international trade in the entire world was \$6.5 trillion in the year 2000 (OECD Monthly Statistics of International Trade, June 2003) the US GDP stood at \$9.8 trillion (OECD Survey of USA 2003). In other words the US domestic market is nearly one and half times bigger than the world market represented by international trade! Hence, for large swathes of the American bourgeoisie, the US market, for all intents and purposes, is the world market.

However, a fully fledged isolationist foreign policy would seem an unviable option. Firstly, so long as the US enjoys economic supremacy any retreat from an active foreign policy, which is necessary to maintain the drive towards 'free trade' and ensures America's dominance of the world's financial system, would be detrimental to the interests of US bourgeoisie as a whole. Furthermore, those with most to gain from an interventionist foreign policy - the financial institutions of Wall Street, the major multinationals, the oil majors and the military-industrial complex, are the most powerful and influential sections of the American bourgeoisie. As consequence, an active interventionist foreign policy has traditionally been the orthodoxy of the policy making establishment and has been adopted sooner or later by most mainstream politicians.

However, isolationism has been been a central issue uniting various anti-establishment and populist political campaigns rooted in particularistic interests. As an amalgam of often contradictory interests the isolationist tendency is often incoherent and diffuse. It has been led by maverick politicians of both the Right - e.g. Ross Perot and Buchanan - and the Left - e.g. Nevertheless, there is a widespread isolationist sentiment in the American Congress that in the right circumstances can be mobilised to constrain foreign policy and is a political force that can not be ignored.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, much to alarm of some commentators, isolationist sentiments began to penetrate the foreign policy establishment. Even the editors of the main house journals of the foreign policy



The arguments of this isolationist tendency within the American bourgeoisie were fortified by the perilous state of the US economy at the end of the 1980s. Although Reagan's acceleration of the arms race can be seen to have played an important part in the downfall of the 'Evil Empire', it had also placed the USA in severe economic difficulties. The huge growth in military expenditure, coupled with Reagan's policy of tax cuts for the rich, had opened up a big hole in the Government finances. To finance its growing budget deficits the Reagan government had borrowed vast sums on the financial markets pushing up American interest rates. This had led to a substantial rise in the exchange rate of the Dollar. Faced with both rising interest rates and a highly overvalued Dollar, large swathes of American industry found itself unable to compete with the flood of imports from the 'newly industrialising economies' of East Asia. As a consequence of this flood of imports, America's trade deficit with the rest of the world soared.

It is true that by the end 1980s concerted efforts by the world's leading central banks and strenuous efforts on the part of the US administration had gone some way towards unwinding the gross imbalances generated by the Reaganomics of the early 1980s. But with the financial crisis of 1987 and the subsequent slide into recession there appeared little prospect that such attempts to substantially reduce the huge trade and budget deficits could be sustained.

For many bourgeois commentators, America's economic problems were symptoms of its underlying economic decline that had become apparent since the late 1960s. Far from reversing America's relative decline as a world power, as they had originally been intended to do, Reagan's economic policies had appeared to have greatly accelerated it. Whereas at the beginning of the 1980s the US had still remained the world's largest net creditor, by the end of the decade it had become the world's largest net debtor. It seemed that American manufacturing industry was increasingly unable to compete with 'lean production' methods of Japan, and the cheap and compliant labour of East Asia. Furthermore, America's attempt to follow the historical example of Britain, by prolonging its economic hegemony by shifting away from the production of surplus-value in industrial production to the interception of the surplus-value produced elsewhere by means of its dominance of international finance, looked like being short lived. The Japanese banks and financial institutions, bloated as it subsequently turned out by the unsustainable asset bubble of the late 1980s, now loomed large and threatened to invade American capital's last place of refuge.

Hence, for the pessimists amongst the American bourgeoisie, it seemed that at the very moment of its triumph over its great adversary, the USSR, America had entered the beginning of its demise as the world's economic super-power. America, like all previous empires, it seemed, was destined to decline, weighed down by the sheer military cost of maintaining its imperialist ambitions. At the end of the 1980s, it did not seem to many that the 21st century would

be a 'new American century'. The future seemed to belong to the land of the rising Sun.

### *Multilateralism and the New World Order*

At first sight it might seem that the fall of the USSR should have allowed the American state to assume the role of the sole global super-power at the same time as gaining a huge peace dividend. With the fall of the USSR, America's military might dwarfed that of all the other major military powers put together. There would seem to have been plenty of scope for cutting military expenditure without impairing America's ability to 'police' any new world order. Of course, there were powerful interests amongst the American military-industrial complex opposed to large scale cuts in weapon spending, but perhaps a more important obstacle to such cuts was the remaining legacy of the working class offensive of the 1960s and 1970s - the 'Vietnam syndrome'.

The American bourgeoisie has long been reluctant to send their sons (and now their daughters) to war. They have preferred to leave not only the rank and file but also much of the officer corps of the American armed forces to be drawn predominantly from the working class - and in doing so had provided an important escape route and career path out of the urban ghettos. This has been possible because American imperialism was not built on colonialism or prolonged military occupation of foreign lands. Indeed, through much of the century America had sought to break up the old colonial empires of the European imperial powers. Instead, the US has depended on its economic supremacy, covert operations and proxy forces to maintain its hold on its 'empire' and advance its foreign interests.

As a consequence, the American army, in contrast to that of Britain and France, has not been used to export social relations into its dependencies. Nor has the American Army had much practice dealing with the problem of maintaining morale of soldiers stationed in far away places fighting people for interests very remote from their own.

However, the problems for the American military of being involved in a prolonged conflict in adverse conditions in foreign lands during a period of heightened class conflict at home, became all too clear with the Vietnam War. For the American bourgeoisie the defeat in Vietnam, which was to a significant extent caused by the insubordination of the American armed forces, was a humiliation. For the front line junior officer who experienced the fragging, mutiny and collapse in morale at first hand, it was traumatic. By the late 1980s this generation of junior officers were graduating into positions of high command giving rise to a general aversion amongst the American military to risky or prolonged military engagements.<sup>2</sup>

The overriding concern of the American military in their strategic and tactical planning, which emerged at the end of the Cold War, has been to avoid both large numbers of casualties and long term military commitments by

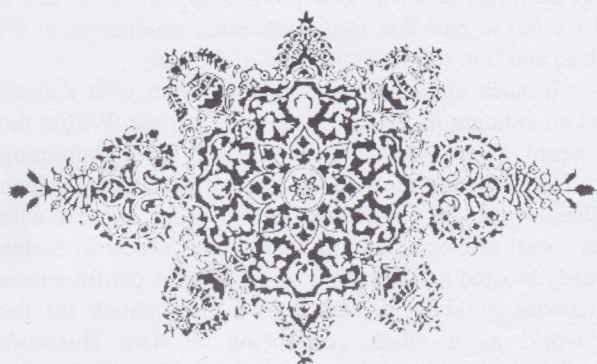
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establishment began to argue for a gradual disengagement from world affairs in the face of the perceived decline of the US economic power. (see *The Imperative of American Leadership: A Challenge to Neo-Isolationism* by J. Muravchik, AEI Press, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup>Indeed, as we have seen in the run up to the war in Iraq, the American generals have proved far more reluctant to invade Iraq than the civilian military strategists that surround Rumsfeld.





ensuring the use of overwhelming force.<sup>3</sup> To achieve this objective, military planning has depended on increasing massively the firepower available to each soldier, a preference for air war over ground war and the automation of weapons of war in order to keep military personnel out of the firing range. Yet increasing the 'organic composition of destruction' in this way has meant ever more sophisticated and thus costly weaponry. To avoid the risk of casualties, the reliance on the soldier and his rifle has been replaced by aircraft and 'smart bombs'. As a consequence, the costs of maintaining US military supremacy have escalated.

If the US was to act as global policeman in the post-cold war era, it seemed necessary that the American armed forces would require the capability of intervening anywhere in the world against 'failed' or 'rogue states'. But this meant that the high costs of matching the Russians in conventional and nuclear forces would now be replaced by the huge costs of the rapid deployment of overwhelming force anywhere in the world.

Thus, although there were many amongst the American bourgeoisie whose mouths watered at the prospect of a new unified global capitalism under the aegis of an all powerful American state, there were many who feared that an interventionist foreign policy would be far too expensive. For the industrial capitalist with large amounts of capital sunk in plant and equipment in America, or with a largely American market; or for those in the ruling and middle classes fearful that the cuts in social provision of the Reagan years would lead to increasing social discontent, a more isolationist foreign policy seemed a more preferable option.

However, there was one trump card that could be used against proponents of isolationism - that card was the American economy's dependence on oil. With the depletion of oil reserves in the Americas, the US faced the prospect of increasing reliance on the one of the most volatile and militarised regions of the world - the Middle East. It was around this issue of oil that Bush Snr sought to resolve the dilemma between an expensive interventionism and a cheap isolationism by adopting a policy of multilateralism with his 'New World Order'. And it is therefore no surprise that Bush Snr's 'New World Order' was both proclaimed and consummated with the Second Gulf War of 1991 - a war

fought by American, British and French forces, but paid for by Japan, Germany and Saudi Arabia.

### From the First to the Second Gulf War

The Iranian Counter-Revolution the early 1980s had dramatically altered the situation in the middle east and particularly the all important oil rich gulf states for America and the West. The long established pro-western Shah had been replaced by a pan-Islamic theocracy committed to spreading its version of anti-western Islamism across the middle east and beyond. The rift between the USA and Saudi Arabia, which had arisen over Israel and the oil blockade of 1973, had largely been overcome by 1979 and the internal conflicts between the traditionalist and the modernising middle classes had been mitigated by the greatly enhanced oil revenues. However, despite being well equipped, Saudi Arabia's army was generally regarded as being ineffective, leaving the country vulnerable to hostile neighbours. Furthermore, while the internal tensions were to some extent contained by the growth in oil revenues, they remained a threat to the long term stability of the Saudi regime.

The third major power in the Gulf was Iraq. The US had backed the Ba'athists in the 1960s in order to prevent the Iraqi Communist Party from taking power. However, once the Ba'athist had consolidated power, they began to adopt a policy of state-led national development that followed the nationalisation of the oil industry in 1971. As a result the Ba'ath government in the 1970s gained the support of the Iraqi Communist Party, which still remained the largest party in the country, and increasingly became aligned with the USSR. Hence, following the Iranian Revolution, of the three major powers in the Gulf, two were avowedly hostile to the West and one, Saudi Arabia, while pro-western, was potentially unstable.

However, there was little to unite the pan-Islamic regime of Iran with the pan-Arab modernising regime in Iraq. On coming to power Saddam Hussein took the opportunity of Iran's disarray following its revolution to launch an attack ostensibly in order to regain territory that had been lost earlier in the decade to the Shah. This was to lead to the first Gulf War of 1981-88, which was to last for eight years and leave an estimated one million dead.

The US took the opportunity of backing the 'lesser evil' of Saddam Hussein in a war that served to contain both Iran and Iraq. Crucially it also served to reduce the supply of both Iraqi and Iranian oil on to the world market at a time when the oil shortage of the 1970s had given way to the oil glut of the 1980s, which threatened to lead to a collapse in the price that would wipe out the American high cost oil industry. Indeed, for the US it became advantageous to prolong the war, and as the Iran-contra scandal revealed, the Americans were quite prepared to supply arms to both sides.

For Saddam Hussein the war provided a perfect means to consolidate his newly established position as leader both within the potentially factious Ba'athist party and within the country as a whole. The imperatives of war allowed Saddam Hussein to ruthlessly crush both opposition within his own Ba'athist Party and to destroy the organisation of the Communist Party that had by now become completely compromised by its support for the regime and its commitment to nationalism. With the mobilisation for war

<sup>3</sup>This doctrine of using overwhelming force in order to minimise US casualties has been named after its principal advocate, Colin Powell, who is now secretary of state in the Bush administration.



Saddam Hussein was able to militarise society by bringing a vast proportion of the working class under direct military discipline. Trade Unions and other organisations of 'civil society', which had been dominated by the Iraqi Communist Party, were integrated within the party-state.

However, after Iraq's early successes, the war became bogged down. Opposition to the regime manifested itself in the form of mass desertions, particularly in those areas like Kurdistan that were distant from Baghdad. With falling army morale the tide of war began to turn against Iraq and Saddam Hussein became increasingly reliant on the support of the US. In order to repulse repeated offensives by the Iranian army Saddam Hussein resorted to chemical and biological weapons, importing the necessary materials from the West, and the US had no objections, not only against Iranian forces but also against Iraq's own deserters.

In the face of mass desertions and mutinies within the Iraqi army it was clear that even with the use of chemical and biological weapons and US military intelligence Iraq could not withstand Iranian assaults in the long term. In 1988 the US intervened by bringing warships into the Gulf in order to 'protect international shipping' and effectively destroyed the Iranian navy. This was sufficient to bring an exhausted Iran to the negotiating table.

After eight years of war both Iran and Iraq were left economically exhausted. Both countries were weighed down with debts and were left with a largely dilapidated oil industry. The situation was particularly acute for Iraq, which had run up vast debts with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, which had been more than willing to lend money to Iraq as a means to prevent the spread of the Iranian Revolution to their own populations.

The state-party patronage system, which served to keep Saddam Hussein in power, had come to depend on the nationalised oil industry and the state control over its revenues. Therefore there was little scope for cutting a deal with the western oil companies, which would have involved relinquishing a certain amount of ownership and control in return for foreign investment to finance the reconstruction of Iraq's oil industry. Yet, saddled with debts and impoverished after eight years of war, the Iraqi state lacked the capital necessary for the reconstruction of its oil industry. Unable to expand production, its only hope to increase its oil revenue was for a rise in the price of oil. However, by 1988 the problem of the oil glut had become particularly acute.

The OPEC countries, led by Saudi Arabia, had sought to shore up the oil price by establishing production quotas for each member state. Yet, while it was in the interest of each state that all the other states abided by their quotas, there was always the temptation for each state to claim exceptional circumstances and produce more than their prescribed quota. Saudi Arabia as the largest producer, and in its role as the leader of the Arab world, had taken on the burden of compensating for the excess production of oil by other OPEC countries by restricting its own production. However, by the late 1980s its own pressing social and economic crisis was making the Saudi Arabian Government increasingly reluctant to sacrifice its own oil revenues for the sake of maintaining high oil prices on behalf of the rest of OPEC. Instead Saudi Arabia adopted a policy of allowing the oil price to fall sharply as a means of forcing the rest of OPEC to comply with agreed oil production quotas or face the consequence of a complete collapse in the price of oil. As

a result the price of oil at one point dropped below \$10 a barrel - a fall in part due to the increased production of oil from Iraq and Iran following the end of the war.

In such circumstance a confrontation with Kuwait offered an enticing prospect for the Iraqi regime. Within the Arab world Kuwait was widely blamed for undermining OPEC. Here was a country with a small population, which was cheating on its oil quotas, not in order to deal with serious social and economic problems, but merely to enrich an already bloated and decadent ruling elite. A confrontation with Kuwait could be presented as a blow struck for the Arab world as a whole, enhancing Saddam Hussein's prestige both at home and throughout the 'Arab nation'.

Furthermore, important oil fields straddled the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border. By increasing production from these oil fields, while Iraq was still recovering from the war and unable to expand its own production, Kuwait was in effect pumping out, and thereby stealing, 'Iraqi oil'. A diplomatic confrontation with Kuwait, backed up by the willingness to use Iraq's overwhelming military force, would at the very least force Kuwait to restrict its oil production and even allow Iraq to redraw its borders around these disputed oil fields.

Kuwait was militarily weak and diplomatically isolated in the Arab world. The only constraint on Iraq was the likely reaction of the US. However, Saddam Hussein had good reasons to expect the USA to keep out of any confrontation with Kuwait. Firstly, the US could be expected to be not too pleased with Kuwait for undermining OPEC's efforts to shore up the price of oil, which after all threatened economic viability of America's own oil industry. Secondly, Iraq had proved itself a useful ally in containing Iran and could at least expect the US to allow it some 'reward' for the sacrifices it had made during eight years of war.

As a consequence, in the Spring of 1990 Iraq reopened long standing border disputes with Kuwait, and backed up this by amassing troops on the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border. Indeed, the US did seem to turn a blind eye to Iraq's belligerent attitude to Kuwait. In a meeting with Saddam Hussein the US ambassador, April Glaspie, was later reported as indicating that the US had no interest in border disputes between Iraq and Kuwait and as late as July Bush Snr opposed moves by the US congress to take action against Iraq for its aggressive attitude towards Kuwait<sup>4</sup>.

Emboldened by the American's relaxed attitude Saddam Hussein made what seems to be a last minute decision to go for the complete annexation of Kuwait. On the 3rd of August 1990 the world woke up to find Saddam Hussein in control of 20% of the world's oil reserves and with little to stop him from attacking Saudi Arabia and

<sup>4</sup> It has often been argued that April Glaspie's remarks to Saddam Hussein gave the green light to Iraq's annexation of Kuwait. As such they were part of a well prepared trap that gave the US an excuse for war. However, we do not accept such a 'conspiracy theory'. It seems that the decision to annex Kuwait was taken at the last minute. Even the Iraq generals expected military action to take the form of minor border incursions until just hours before the invasion. What April Glaspie seems to have given the green light to was a minor border incursion not a wholesale annexation of Kuwait, with all the destabilising effect that could have had on the balance of power in the middle east.



taking another 20%. While the US, and indeed the rest of the Arab world, had been prepared to turn a blind eye to Saddam Hussein sabre rattling against Kuwait and would have even countenanced a limited military incursion to impose a de facto redrawing of the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, a full-scale invasion was another matter.

No doubt Saddam Hussein had banked on the fact that the US would be reluctant to carry out the huge and unprecedented military operation that would be necessary to evict Iraqi forces already established in Kuwait. However, in doing so Saddam Hussein had failed to take account of the impact on US foreign policy of the rapidly changing situation at a global level. By the Summer of 1990 it had become clear that the USSR was rapidly disintegrating and could no longer act as a world power. As we have already pointed out, the alarm over Iraq's invasion provided the perfect opportunity to mobilise the American and Western bourgeoisie around a multilateralist interventionist policy that was to be enshrined in Bush Snr's New World Order.

#### *The Second Gulf War (1991) and its aftermath*

After months of preparations the coalition forces took no chances in operation 'Desert Storm'. With total air supremacy the coalition forces began with a six weeks bombing campaign. The Iraqi army positions were carpet-bombed while the country's infrastructure - roads, sewage plants, electricity power stations etc - was systematically destroyed. An estimated 100,000-200,000 Iraqi troops were slaughtered and tens of thousands of civilians died either directly in the bombing or through the spread of diseases due to lack of clean water.

With morale destroyed by six weeks of incessant bombing the advance of coalition ground forces met with little resistance. Iraqi army conscripts deserted *en masse* at the first opportunity and uprisings broke out in the Kurdish north and in the south of Iraq. Saddam Hussein's regime was on the point of collapse.

However, facing the prospect of either allowing the disintegration of Iraq, which could only be to Iran's advantage, or else committing itself to a full scale occupation of Iraq, which would involve putting down the uprisings, the US decided to pull back. The invasion of Iraq was halted and every effort was made to shore up the Iraqi regime. Fearing that deserting Iraqi conscripts would join up with the uprisings in the South the USAF and RAF directed to bomb them as they fled the front-lines, leading to the infamous 'massacre on the road to Basra'. In terms of the cease fire agreed with Saddam Hussein, all Iraqi aircraft were grounded except the helicopters necessary to put down insurgents. The coalition forces then stood by while Saddam Hussein loyal republican guards ruthlessly crushed the uprisings. As the recent uncovering of mass graves testify, thousands of insurgents in the south were executed, while in the North thousands more died of cold and hunger after fleeing into the mountains on the Turkish border.

It was only in May, weeks after the end of the war, that the 'no fly zones' were introduced to protect the 'Kurds in the North and Shiites in the South'. By then the insurrections, which had taken on a distinctly proletarian character, had been crushed, allowing the US and Britain to

promote a nationalist and religious opposition the Saddam Hussein.<sup>5</sup>

For the Western powers as a whole, it was now clear that Saddam Hussein had proved to be an unpredictable leader who, if left unchecked, could act to destabilise the middle east and threaten the security of the world's oil supplies. Having kept Saddam Hussein in power the question arose as to how to contain him without impairing his ability to act as a counter-weight to neighbouring Iran.

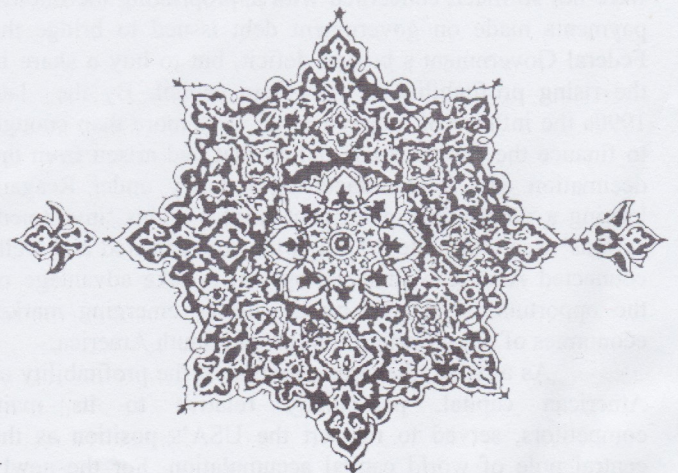
The answer offered by the US, backed by Britain, was to impose economic sanctions on the pretext that Iraq possessed unauthorised weapons of mass destruction. Iraq would still be able to maintain its army and conventional weapons but punitive sanctions would be imposed until it could be verified by UN inspectors that all 'weapons of mass destruction' were destroyed. It was argued that under such pressure either Saddam Hussein would be brought to heel or else he would be eventually replaced by a more amenable leader of Iraq. Hence eventually Iraq could be 'readmitted into the international (bourgeois) community'.

Of course, for the US and Britain sanctions had the additional advantage of keeping Iraqi oil off the world market. Not only was Iraq forbidden to export oil without UN authorisation, it was unable to import the spare parts necessary to maintain oil production.

By repeatedly insisting on moving the goal posts concerning the weapons inspections the US was able to prolong sanctions throughout most of the 1990s. However, the policy of using sanctions to contain Iraq depended on support of the other great powers and a commitment on the part of the US to multilateralism. By the end of the 1990s this was coming into question.

#### **The limits of Multilateralism**

Fears that the fall of the USSR would lead both to the break up of the western world into competing trade blocs and to the decline of the USA were to prove a little premature. In Japan the financial bubble of the 1980s burst, exposing the underlying weakness of Japanese capital. Weighed down by enormous 'non-performing' debts the Japanese economy entered a prolonged period of stagnation from which it has yet to recover. In Europe the brief boom that followed German re-unification in the early 1990s was to be followed by nearly a decade of slow growth. In contrast, the US in the



<sup>5</sup>see *Ten Days That Shook Iraq*. Wildcat (London) and also [www.geocities.com/novar\\_buttheclasswar](http://www.geocities.com/novar_buttheclasswar).



1990s was able to reassert itself as the central pole of global capital accumulation.

By the mid-1990s it had become clear that the Reaganomics of the early 1980s had assisted a major restructuring of the American economy. The over-valued dollar and high interest rates had hastened the shift away from the long established manufacturing industries of the North and East, as these industries were forced either to rationalise or relocate outside the US. At the same time the huge military expenditure acted as substantial subsidy for the research and development necessary to establish the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) that were to become decisive in 1990s.

This restructuring of US capital necessarily involved a decisive defeat of the American working class. The highly paid and organised car workers of Detroit faced compliance with the new 'flexible' working practices demanded by 'lean production', or the relocation of their jobs to Mexico or South Korea. The 'new economy' required highly skilled and educated computer programmers and software engineers - although often on short term contracts - but it also could depend on cheap, often illegal, immigrant labour from across the Mexican border to undertake the growing profusion of McJobs. Cuts in welfare, continued well into the 1990s under Clinton, increased the competition on those in work from the industrial reserve army of unemployed. As a result, American capital was able to hold down wages and ensure that it had a flexible and compliant workforce.

With greater 'labour flexibility' American capital could take full advantage of the 'just in time' production, computerised stock control and total quality control methods, which had been made possible by the new information technologies, and that served to raise the rate of profit by speeding up the turnover of capital. At the same time, American capital succeeded in making American workers work more hours for the same pay increasing absolute production of surplus value, and with this the rate of profit. As a result, after nearly twenty years of decline, the profitability of US capital had begun to steadily increase from the mid-1980s.

This revival of the profitability of American capital served to sustain the large inflows of money-capital into the U.S. that had originally arisen to finance the huge budget deficits of the Reagan years. But increasingly these inflows were not so much concerned with appropriating the interest payments made on government debt issued to bridge the Federal Government's budget deficit, but to buy a share in the rising profitability of American capital. By the late 1990s the inflows of money-capital were more than enough to finance the chronic trade deficit that had arisen from the decimation of US manufacturing industry under Reagan, leaving a substantial 'investment surplus'. This 'investment surplus' was channelled through the sophisticated and well-connected American financial system to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the newly emerging market economies of Asia, Eastern Europe and South America.

As a result, the strong revival of the profitability of American capital, particularly relative to its main competitors, served to reassert the USA's position as the central pole of world capital accumulation. For the newly 'unified bourgeoisie' across the globe, the US was where the money was to be made. Its expanding domestic markets

provided opportunities for manufacturers across the world to sell their products. Its sophisticated and well-connected financial system, protected by the US state, offered good returns for the world's investors and speculators. The control, if not the ownership, of the capital of the world was being increasingly concentrated in the USA and Wall Street.

The emergence of a unified global capitalism centred on the USA provided the basis that was necessary to sustain New World Order, which had been proclaimed by Bush Snr at the onset of the Second Gulf War of 1991. In this new order, the old multilateral organisations of the Cold War - the United Nations, NATO, The World Bank, IMF - had been revamped, and together with newly established ones such as the World Trade Organisation, were to act as nodes in a new rules based system of global governance. This new rules-based system served to contain the imperialist rivalries of the great powers and ensure 'a level playing field' for competing capitals of different national affiliations. The various multilateral organisations served both to enforce these rules and to act as forums through which global policies could be formulated and implemented to address common economic and political problems that faced the world's bourgeoisie as a whole.

The US was to play the leading role in the New World Order. As the first among equals, and the main source of funds for these multilateral organisations of global governance, the US had a determining influence in the drawing up of the international rules. The US, of course, was obliged to abide by these rules, and often was obliged pursue its foreign policy objectives through lengthy diplomacy and negotiations with the multilateral organisations. However, in return the other great powers were obliged to share the military and economic burdens required in defending and extending global capitalism, particularly against those 'rogue states' that still refused to accept the wonders of neo-liberalism.

However, by the late 1990s the New World Order and the US's multilateral foreign policy began to reach its limits.

#### *The crisis of multilateralism*

For Bush Snr, the New World Order had emerged as a means to resolve the central dilemma of American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. How was the USA to police the world without incurring unsustainable military costs? The answer, as we have seen, was that in return for consultation and a commitment to commonly agreed rules the other great economic and military powers would share the burden of maintaining the conditions necessary for capital accumulation across the world.

At first the reassertion of the US as the central pole of global capital accumulation had served to sustain the New World Order. The recovery of the American economy from the recession of the early 1990s dragged the rest of the world developed economies behind it. As the US became the main centre for investment and speculative opportunities large swathes of the bourgeoisie in both Europe and in the periphery developed interests in the US economy and sought to emulate its success by advocating neo-liberal policies at home. This pro-American orientation of large parts of the bourgeoisie outside the USA meant that the US state could act, in concert with the international organisations of 'global



governance, as the prime representative of the interests of the newly emerging 'global bourgeoisie'.

However, this very economic resurgence of the US also served to give added weight to the disadvantages of a multilateralist foreign policy for the American bourgeoisie.

Firstly, by the end of the 1990s there were growing concerns among sections of the American bourgeoisie that the Europeans were becoming increasingly adept at tying America down through a series of international treaties that threatened to seriously damage US economic superiority. From the Kyoto agreement on global warming, which required large cuts in carbon emissions from the USA, through the restrictions Europe imposed on bio-technology with its opposition to GM foods, to various trade disputes, European capital could be seen to be taking advantage of America's compliance with the rules of international diplomacy.

Secondly, while America delivered its side of the bargain, the other great powers, particularly those in Europe, were failing to deliver their side. Europe proved both unable to develop a common and coherent foreign policy, and unwilling to increase its spending on defence. As a result, Europe as a whole was unable to take up its full share of the military and diplomatic burden of policing the world.

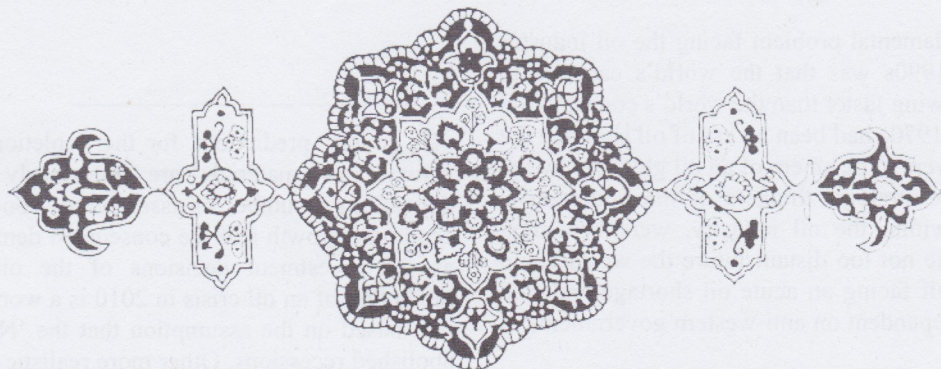
At first, the failure of the European Union to formulate a common foreign policy had its advantages for the US. It meant that the European Union was unable to influence the transition of the former Eastern bloc from state capitalism. Proposals that the transition of former Eastern bloc countries should be towards some model of 'social market capitalism' did not last much beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall. Instead the policies of 'short sharp shock', of rapid deregulation and privatisation, much favoured by US and global financial capital, were placed at the top of the agenda. The only question allowed was how short and how sharp these shock policies should be in the varying economies concerned. Of course, these 'shock therapies' tended to last much longer than expected and led to disastrous results for the majority of people in the former Eastern bloc. However, they also created a new pro-American and neo-liberal orientated bourgeoisie in these countries, as wealth became concentrated in the hands of a few - forming the basis of what was to become the 'new Europe' of Rumsfeld.

that had precipitated the war between Croatia and Serbia and then to the Bosnian war in the first place; and it was these rivalries that blocked the European Union's attempts to intervene and impose a solution. As a result, the US had been obliged, rather reluctantly, to intervene and commit its own troops to impose its peace. For many in the American bourgeoisie, the example of Yugoslavia showed all too well that their fractious and gutless European brothers were incapable of even policing their own back-yard let alone aiding America in its global responsibilities.

The financial crisis that broke out in Asia in 1987-8 punctured the appetite of American capital for investments in 'newly emerging market economies'. Japan remained locked in chronic stagnation and the European bourgeoisie had made little headway in pushing back its entrenched working class. The 'investment surplus' that had flooded into the 'newly emerging economies' now turned to the US itself, creating the beginnings of what was to become the Dot.Com boom. Amidst the euphoria that surrounded the so-called new weightless economy that could defy all the previously known economic laws of gravity, it could appear that the US had little need of the rest of the world. America was where the profits and action was and the rest of the world would either have to keep up or go the wall.

The general tenor of the growing criticisms of the established multilateralist American foreign policy, with its now almost regular commitment to Clintonite 'humanitarian wars', was decidedly isolationist. However, amongst the growing opposition to the orthodox American foreign policy, there emerged a distinct strand of more far sighted and outward looking strategic thinkers who were to become known as the neo-conservatives.

For the neo-conservatives, America could not ignore the rest of the world - it had to dominate the rest of the world or else be eventually dominated by some other power in the world. But if the USA was to maintain its global hegemony in the long term it could not simply rely on its current economic superiority. On the contrary, it had to assert its political and military power in order to shape the world in its own interests. America needed to secure the supply of strategic commodities into the future, it needed to prise open the economies of central Asia that still remained impervious to American capital, and it had to nip potential military and economic rivals in the bud.<sup>6</sup>



But the European Union's failure to develop a common European foreign policy, due to the continued rivalries between its great powers, also meant that it was unable to take up its role in defending the New World Order. This became evident in the case of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. It was rivalries between the European powers

<sup>6</sup> In the long term it is China that it is seen as the main potential rival to US hegemony. Combining the advantages of the command economy with those of the 'free market', the past decade has seen rapid export-led economic growth based on low labour costs, which is transforming China into the new 'workshop' of the world.



However, to pursue such an aggressive foreign policy had two important implications, as the neo-conservatives were well aware. Firstly, on a diplomatic level, an aggressive pursuit of American interests across the globe would inevitably come into conflict with the interests of its 'allies'. The US would therefore have to throw off the encumbrances and entanglements of the multilateralism that had evolved out of the Cold War under Bush Snr and Bill Clinton.

Secondly, the neo-conservatives recognised that there had to be a major re-think of military strategy. Against the orthodox military thinking of the generals, which stressed the need for overwhelming force, the neo-conservatives called for the deployment of smaller more flexible forces using more selective 'smart' weapons. Not only would the deployment of smaller forces be far more rapid, but they would be far cheaper. As a result the costs of 'policing of the world' could be substantially reduced.

However, as the neo-conservatives were well aware, the deployment of smaller forces would also carry far more risk of high casualties if things went wrong. If their new military strategy was to work the ghost of Vietnam that still haunted the American bourgeoisie and the American high command had to be exorcised. After all, insubordination verging on mutiny against the Vietnam war had come at a high point in working class struggles in the US - now that the American working class had been more or less pacified fears that military involvement would lead to 'another Vietnam' remained little more than a spectre.

Although the neo-conservatives that were to rally around the *Plan for A New American Century* were well organised and held influential positions, they remained a largely marginal position. With the election of Bush Jnr the neo-conservatives captured important positions. However, in the first few months US policy appeared to be taking a more isolationist direction, rather than that of an aggressive unilateralism advocated by the neo-conservatives. But once again it was oil that trumped the isolationist case. With the explosion of the Twin Towers impressed once again the importance of the Middle East to the US economy and 'way of life'. And the neo-conservative agenda became the order of the day.

### **The Third Gulf War (2003) and the New World Order of Bush Jnr.**

The immediate fundamental problem facing the oil industry in the 1980s and 1990s was that the world's capacity to produce oil was growing faster than the world's consumption of oil. Whereas the 1970s had been an era of oil shortage the following decades were to be an era of an oil glut. But by the mid-1990s the more strategic thinkers of the bourgeoisie, particularly those within the oil industry, were becoming concerned that in the not too distant future the world could once again find itself facing an acute oil shortage and find itself increasingly dependent on anti-western governments in the Gulf.

Firstly, by the 1990s it was becoming clear that the rate of discovery of new potential oil fields was falling rapidly. Chronically low oil prices meant that there was little incentive to find new sources of oil. Also most of the most likely areas for the discovery of oil had already been searched. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the non-

OPEC fields that had come on tap after the 'oil price shocks' of the 1970s, most notably those in the North Sea and Alaska, were reaching the end of their peak of production and were about to enter a period of decline. As a consequence, with continued economic growth increasing the demand for oil it was predicted that the West would become increasingly dependent on oil from the middle east and could face an oil crisis as soon as the year 2010.<sup>7</sup>

These fears that the current oil glut would give way to an oil shortage in perhaps little more than a decade had a decided influence on the evolution of US foreign policy towards the Gulf states and brought about a two-pronged approach. Firstly, it became clear that the policy of containment towards both Iraq and Iran would have to be brought to a conclusion in the medium term by bringing them back into the fold of the 'international (bourgeois) community'. Secondly, it was hoped that this policy of rehabilitation of these oil rich 'rogue Gulf states' could be complemented by developing the oil fields in Africa and the former USSR and by developing alternatives to oil such as natural gas and the 'hydrogen economy'.

However, there were major problems facing such a response to the future threat of a new oil crisis. Although all the main capitalist powers had an interest in maintaining a secure and reliable source of oil and, as a consequence, had fully supported the policy of containment of both Iraq and Iran, there was a distinct division of interests concerning how such containment should be brought to an end, particularly as regards Iraq. For the high-cost oil producers, the UK and the US, it had been important to keep as much Iraqi oil off the world market as possible in the short term in order to shore up the oil price. Not only had the US and the UK led the war on Iraq in the first place but had also been the prime advocates of maintaining punitive sanctions in the decade after the Second Gulf War of 1991. However, the mainly oil-consuming nations, such France and Germany, were far less concerned with falling oil prices in the short term. Indeed, much to the chagrin of the Americans, the French and Germans, joined also by the Russians, increasingly began to exploit the resolute adherence of British and American firms to maintaining sanctions on Iraq to steal a march on their competitors by doing back door deals with the Iraqi regime in the hope of gaining privileged access to the development of Iraqi oil in the future when sanctions were lifted.

<sup>7</sup>Of course, predictions for the depletion of oil and other natural raw materials are notoriously unreliable. They depend on a number of assumptions concerning the rate of economic growth and the consequent demand for oil as well as the investment decisions of the oil companies. The prediction of an oil crisis in 2010 is a worst case scenario that was based on the assumption that the 'New Economy' had abolished recessions. Other more realistic predictions put the oil crunch in 2020s. However, it must also be remembered that it can take up to a decade to develop a new oil field so that it can supply the world market, and up to two or three decades before such new fields reach peak production levels. Thus, both the oil companies and governments have to take such predictions seriously.



By 1998, after seven years of UN inspections, it was becoming clear that Iraq had been disarmed of its so-called 'weapons of mass destruction'. Facing the end of its sole justification of sanctions that kept Iraqi oil off the world market, the US, on the pretext of a dispute concerning the numbers of inspectors allowed into the so-called Presidential Palaces, ordered the withdrawal of all UN weapons inspectors and launched a four day bombing campaign of Iraq. Then, backed by its faithful ally Britain, the US repeatedly blocked any attempt to allow the return of the UN weapon inspectors. There then emerged a stalemate over Iraq. By stalling the return of weapons inspectors the US and Britain were able to prevent the lifting of sanctions against Iraq and prevent the French, Germans and Russians gaining a head start in the race for Iraqi oil. But at the same time attempts to shore up sanctions against Iraq, which were becoming increasingly ignored, only served to lock out British and American firms.

The main hope for reducing reliance on the Gulf states was

the development of the vast oil and natural gas fields surrounding the Caspian Sea. But most of these fields belonged to the former USSR. This meant that not only did they fall under the sphere of influence of the Russian state but also only existing ways of piping the oil to the west lay through Russia. Following the privatisation of the Russian oil and gas industries under Yeltsin the ownership had become concentrated into the hands of a few very power 'oligarchs'. With the strengthening of the Russian state with Putin, it became clear that the both the oligarchs and the Russian state would insist on driving a hard bargain with West for the extraction of oil and gas from central Asia.

Of course, it was feasible to pipe oil and gas from Caspian Sea via routes that did not go through Russia. Geographically Iran was the obvious way of piping Caspian oil out but this was not on, for obvious political reasons. The other alternatives were: through the Caucasus and then via Turkey or the Balkans, or through Afghanistan. However, all these routes involved very long pipelines running through potentially unstable countries and involved high development costs. As a consequence, such plans were to remain largely speculative, being used mainly as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from the Russians.

However, even if the Western oil companies were able to gain access to Caspian oil and gas on reasonable terms from the Russians the problem remained that the costs of developing these relatively untapped fields would be very high and eventually operating costs would be far higher than those of the Gulf states. As a consequence, there were considerable doubts as to whether Caspian oil fields could

replace Saudi Arabia, or the other Gulf states, as the 'swing producer' that could regulate the price of oil by increasing or decreasing its scale of production.

For the neo-conservative critics of the multilateral foreign policies of the Clinton era, the two-pronged strategy of dealing with the problem of a future oil shortage and America's increasing reliance on the Gulf states had become bogged down. At best they would require time to work but for the neo-conservatives time was running out. Pointing to the instability of Saudi Arabia the neo-conservatives warned that the US may well wake up to find that all the states on the Gulf would have become anti-American and, with the onset of an oil shortage, these states would be able to hold the US, and indeed the entire West, to ransom!

For the neo-conservatives it was necessary to cut through all the diplomatic niceties of multilateralism and directly intervene in the Middle East in order to reshape it in America's interests while it was still possible to do so. For the neo-conservatives the fall of the USSR



had opened up the possibility for the US to restructure the Middle East and the Gulf states with the Second Gulf War of 1991 but Bush Snr had lost his nerve and had bottled out. As such Iraq was unfinished business.

An invasion of Iraq would not only allow the US to appropriate the second largest proven oil reserves in the world, it would also show in no uncertain terms that the USA was willing and able to impose a 'regime change' anywhere in the world. American troops could be withdrawn from Saudi Arabia but, with bases in Iraq, America could intervene in when ever necessary.

At the same time, America would be in a better position to put pressure on Iran. Iran is the great prize for the neo-conservative project. Not only has it been a great thorn in the side of US foreign policy since the overthrow of the Shah, it also has undeveloped oil reserves almost equal to those of Iraq. Iran is also well placed geographically. Not only does it command the Persian Gulf but also borders the Caspian Sea. Iran is perfectly placed to provide an outlet for the vast oil and natural gas fields of central Asia that would otherwise have to pass through Russia.

#### *Towards war*

During their years in the political wilderness the neo-conservatives could only despair at the continued complacency and inertia of US foreign. As the neo-conservatives admitted, it was felt that only a event on the scale of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour in 1942 would be sufficient to mobilise the American bourgeoisie around the neo-conservative agenda. As we have already noted,



although the neo-conservatives were able to capture key positions in Bush Jnr's new administration, and although they had the backing of influential interests both in the military-industrial complex and oil industry, the neo-conservatives remained a minor voice in the formation of US foreign policy. Faced with what they saw as the 'liberal pessimism' of the state department, and an overcautious and conservative military high command on one-side, and the head-in-the sand isolationist tendencies within the Republican Party on the other, it seemed in the first few months of Bush Jnr's Presidency that the neo-conservatives would remain as prisoners within the Bush administration and the political establishment.

However, the events of September 11th 2001 came to the rescue. In the midst of the hysteria that was whipped up following the attack on the Twin Towers the analogy with Pearl Harbour was firmly established. The USA was at war with an enemy all the more fearsome by the fact of it being amorphous and invisible. Petty particular interests had now to put to one side, so that the nation, indeed all the 'free world', could unite in the 'War on Terrorism'.<sup>8</sup> With the US bourgeoisie, and indeed much of the population, shocked out of their complacency, the Bush administration was able to seize the political initiative by adopting the neo-conservative agenda.

Within days of September 11th the more eager neo-conservatives were already pressing for a war on Iraq. However, it was soon accepted that an immediate attack on Afghanistan would be a useful detour and prelude to the remaking of the middle east with a war on Iraq. After all a war against Afghanistan could be far more easily sold to American public opinion than an immediate war on Iraq. There was not a shred evidence that linked the secularist Iraqi regime with Al Qaida, indeed it was well recognised that Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were bitter enemies. In contrast, Afghanistan was sheltering the very master-mind of the attack on the Twin Towers.

In addition an invasion of a 'failed state' such as Afghanistan, which lacked even the semblance of a conventional army, could be launched in a matter of weeks, thereby maintaining the political momentum of the 'War on Terrorism'. In contrast, an invasion of Iraq could take months to prepare, allowing plenty of time for the effect of hyperbole surrounding September 11th to dissipate. For the neo-conservatives an invasion of Afghanistan would also have the advantage of allowing the US to gain both a toe-hold in Central Asia and to secure the eastern flank of Iran.

The easy victory in Afghanistan appeared to vindicate the neo-conservatives. Despite the dire warnings from the liberal faint-hearts that the US would follow both Britain and Russia in becoming mired in a prolonged guerrilla war in the mountains of Afghanistan, the invasion succeeded with few American casualties. Although thousands of Afghans died and millions were forced to flee their homes, the swift end to the war meant that humanitarian disaster of mass starvation over the winter, predicted by the UN and many NGO's and charities, failed to occur.

<sup>8</sup>Of course, September 11th came in the wake of the collapse of the dot.com boom. An amorphous external threat was a timely distraction for Bush Jnr and the Republican Party machine in the face of growing economic problems at home.

With America triumphant at the end of the war, Bush confirmed his administration's commitment to the neo-conservative agenda with his 'axis of evil' speech in January 2002. By the late Spring it was clear that the Bush administration had made the decision that US should invade Iraq. The only questions that remained amongst the competing factions within the Bush administration were how the war on Iraq should be fought and how it should be sold.

Over the Summer reports emerged concerning the various military plans for the invasion of Iraq as a compromise was hammered out between the neo-conservatives and the military high command of the American armed forces. Although they had been obliged to accept that war against Iraq was government policy, the American generals were concerned to squash the high risk plans of Rumsfeld's protégées and whizz kids for a rapid precision attack, using elite and special forces, that would aim to decapitate the Iraqi regime and paralyse its armed forces. They insisted on the use of overwhelming force using substantial ground forces backed massive air support that would take months to assemble. However, while they succeeded in scuppering the more radical military plans put forward by the neo-conservatives, the American generals were obliged to make substantial revisions to established military doctrines.

On the diplomatic front the question was what should be the pretext of war and under what banner should it be fought. For the neo-conservatives the war on Iraq should be presented as simply the extension of the 'War on Terrorism'. The USA should cut through all the encumbrances of multilateralism and lead a coalition of the willing to overthrow the Iraqi regime.<sup>9</sup> For the opponents of the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration, who recognised the propaganda difficulties in linking Iraq with Al Qaida and who feared the consequences of such reckless action that might well destabilise the Middle East and cause a serious split amongst the great powers, the pretext for war should be the long standing issue of Iraq's alleged possession of 'weapons of mass destruction'. This pretext would inevitably reactivate the UN process of weapons inspections and draw the US into a multilateralist approach by involving the other great powers through the UN. In this way any negative consequences of an invasion of Iraq could be minimised.

With the generals insisting on a major build up of forces that could take months, the arguments for at least giving diplomacy a chance were able to gain ground. With a war pencilled in for Winter there was more than six months to bring the great powers on board for a UN sanctioned operation. However, perhaps the decisive consideration that tipped the balance against the neo-conservatives favoured option for unilateral action and for going down the UN route was the approach of the mid-term congressional elections.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, under both Bush Snr and Clinton America's commitment to multilateralism was never absolute. The US had always reserved the right to take action on in its own interest. As Madeline Albright has put it, the principle was 'multilateralism if possible; unilateralism if necessary'. For example, the war in Kosovo was carried out under the auspices of NATO and was only retrospectively sanctioned by the UN Security Council.



There is perhaps little doubt that there was large swathes of the American bourgeoisie, together with much of the foreign policy establishment, that were concerned with Bush Jnr's adoption of the neo-conservative agenda. However, the obvious vehicle for their opposition to the government's new foreign policy was the Democratic Party. But, after September 11th, the Democrats were afraid to put their heads above the parapet for fear of being accused of being unpatriotic. Instead they maintained an uncritical bipartisan approach on foreign policy and, from an early date, had decided to fight the mid-term elections on the 'perilous state of the economy'.

Given the collapse of the Dot.com boom and rapidly rising unemployment the Republican's best bet was to try and keep the debate on foreign policy and the threat of 'international terrorism'. Yet if they succeeded in making foreign policy the central issue of the campaign they risked the Democrats taking up a position of 'loyal opposition' by accepting the aims but criticising the way the Bush administration was going about achieving them. By adopting the UN route, under the pretext of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the Republican's could capture the centre ground and prevent the Democrats from accusing the Bush administration of being reckless and putting the USA out on a limb in the 'international community'. In addition it allowed Bush to present himself as a World Statesman, as CNN showed almost nightly footage of the President meeting the world's leaders over matters of war and peace.

However, the adoption of the UN route the US had to bring the other great powers on board, particularly those that had veto powers on the Security Council. Of course, the US had a willing ally in Tony Blair.

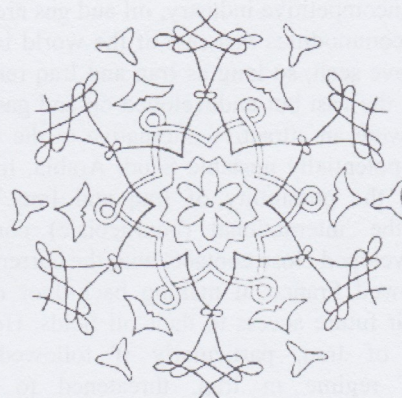
In the build up to the war on Iraq Tony Blair was aptly caricatured as Bush's poodle. However, in aligning himself so closely with the US, Tony Blair was only taking a long standing feature of British foreign policy to its logical conclusion. Ever since the end of the Second World War Britain has sought to act as the junior partner to the US and as its bridge to Europe. With respect to the Middle East, ever since the Suez debacle in 1956 Britain has not attempted to develop a policy that was at variance with that of the USA. But this commitment and faith in the 'special relationship' with the USA has not been the result of some failings of successive British governments but an expression of common and convergent interest between British and American capital.

Like the US, Britain is not only a major consumer of oil it is also one of the main producers of oil outside OPEC. It is the domicile of two of the oil majors, BP and Shell, that have global interests in the production of oil and have maintained close contacts with both Conservative and Labour Governments. Also, like America, Britain is a major arms producer. Over 10% of Britain's remaining manufacturing output is defence related and the military continues to gobble up half of Britain's research and development funding.

However, more generally, the major restructuring of British capitalism, which began under Thatcher, has left Britain crucially dependent on the earnings of the City of London and the financial sector. With the decline of her manufacturing, Britain has found a unique niche for itself with the emergence of global financial capital as a conduit channelling money-capital from across the world into the US

financial system. However, British capital's ability to cream off surplus-value from the huge capital flows that pass through London depends crucially on the continuation of the tendency for the free movement of capital and the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies across the world. It also depends, as Tony Blair is no doubt painfully aware, on the continuation of the multilateral system of rule based global governance that is necessary to manage, defend and indeed extend this world economic system based around global finance capital.

Therefore the prime imperative British foreign policy, particularly in the last decade, has been to uphold the New World Order of multilateral world governance and to



support America insofar as it is the only power capable of maintaining this New World Order. This has given rise to a close adherence to the doctrines of Cosmopolitan Liberalism and 'Liberal humanitarian imperialism' that have become the hall-marks of new Labour's foreign policy, leading Blair to fight five 'humanitarian wars' in less than six years in office!

Bush Jnr's election on a decidedly isolationist platform posed a serious threat to British foreign policy. Blair decided early on to make a special effort to develop a strong relation with the Bush administration in an effort to bolster its more cautious and multilateralist factions perhaps most clearly represented by Colin Powell. This policy proved so successful that Blairites were able to boast during the run up to the war that the British government was a distinct voice *within* the policy making process of the Bush administration.

However, by the Summer of 2002 being on the inside of the policy making process of the American government meant, at least tacitly, accepting the inevitability of war. Colin Powell may have been far less hawkish than the super-hawks like Rumsfeld but he was nevertheless still a hawk. Further, if his advice of taking the UN route was to be listened to, Blair had to put his political reputation on the line and bring on board the other main players in the United Nations. As a consequence, Blair became Bush's travelling salesman selling the prospects of war on Iraq across the capitals of Europe and the middle east.

The main obstacles facing Blair's efforts to secure a UN resolution giving authorisation for a war on Iraq were France and Russia, who, as permanent members of the Security Council, could veto any such resolution. The American policy of forcing a regime change in Iraq threatened to reduce to zero France's efforts to steal a march on the Americans in gaining access to Iraqi oil. However, the French government was reluctant to directly oppose the US on this issue. Instead they hoped that through prolonged



negotiations over the UN resolution and the shape and remit of the subsequent weapons inspections to mire the Americans in endless process of diplomacy. With sufficient procrastination the window of opportunity for launching an attack on Iraq would be passed and it could be hoped that the Americans' enthusiasm for war might begin to wane. Failing this, negotiations over the UN resolution could be used as a means to extract compensation for any losses they might incur following an American led invasion of Iraq and the establishment of a pro-American Iraqi government.

Russia was in a far weaker position than France, being dependent to a large degree on American good-will to finance its huge debts, particularly with the IMF. However, it also had much more to lose than France. With its largely decrepit and uncompetitive industry, oil and gas are amongst Russia's few commodities that rest of the world is eager to buy. As we have seen, so long as Iran and Iraq remained as 'rogue states', the vast but undeveloped oil and gas fields of Central Asia were an attractive alternative to the continued reliance on a potentially unstable Saudi Arabia. In order to hedge against the possibility of Iraq and Iran being re-admitted to the 'international (bourgeoisie) community', Russia had developed close contacts with the current regimes and had followed France in making back-door deals that would aid their future access to their oil fields. However, a US invasion of Iraq, particularly if followed by the overthrow of regime in Iran, threatened to seriously undermine Russia's bargaining position with the western oil companies over the access, extraction and development of the oil and gas fields in Central Asia. It also threatened to undo the deals done with the current Iraqi and Iranian governments. As a consequence, Russia hid behind France's position towards the UN resolution.

Following the mid-term Congressional elections the hawk position was strengthened. It soon became clear that any further procrastination on the part of the French would only serve to further strengthen the arguments of the neo-conservatives for the US to give up the UN route and lead a coalition of the willing. Hence, weeks of protracted negotiations were brought to a close by France making crucial concessions. Firstly, France all but accepted that a 'serious breach' of what was to become Resolution 1441 would be sufficient cause for the US to lead a military invasion of Iraq without the authorisation of a second resolution. Secondly, France conceded that strict provisions would be included in the resolution. The weapons inspections would be given a strict dead-line to make its first report. The Iraqi regime was to make a final and complete declaration concerning its possession of 'weapons of mass destruction' so that any proscribed weapons, or weapons production capacity, found after the declaration would count as a 'serious breach' of the resolution. Furthermore, the Iraqi government was under an obligation to fully co-operate with the UN weapons inspectors.

However, while France conceded that a 'serious breach' of Resolution 1441 would warrant military action, France secured crucial concessions in return concerning how it was to be decided that such a 'serious breach' had occurred. Firstly, France was able to secure that the UN weapons inspections would be based on the rules, procedures and personnel already established by the UN. Secondly, France was able to ensure that the weapons inspectors should be led by Hans Blix, whose previous record with the

International Atomic Energy Authority had led many in the US administration to regard him as a soft touch for the Iraqis. Thirdly, France secured America's agreement that the weapons inspectors should report back directly to the Security Council. This implied that any decision to go to war had to be taken in consultation within the UN. If the US insisted on going to war it would have to present its case openly to whole world.

At this point, France could still hope, if not to dissipate the drive to war, still sell its veto for a slice of the spoils of war, particularly if the US was unable to come up with a convincing breach of Resolution 1441. Indeed, as late as January Chirac was still preparing to send French troops to fight in the American led coalition against Iraq.

However, once the military build up in the Middle East began to gather momentum after Christmas, the neo-conservatives could count on the support of the Army high command to argue that diplomacy should be subordinated to military imperatives. Once the huge logistical exercise in transporting 150,000 troops to the Gulf, together with all their supplies and equipment, had been completed there was to be little time for delay. The military high command did not want to deal with the problems of both morale and logistics of maintaining such a large military force poised on the borders of Iraq waiting for action while diplomats and weapons inspectors wrangled over the meaning of certain words and evidence. But more importantly the US military were anxious to invade before the onset of the Iraq Summer. The war had to be begun before the end of March.

Although the neo-conservatives had been obliged to play along with the diplomacy of the UN they were able to insist that once the troops were ready the war must begin, and that there would be no material concessions to the Europeans over the spoils of war.

Faced with the intransigence of the US on the one side, and the unprecedented world-wide opposition to war on the other, European leaders had little to lose and much to gain politically, both amongst their own electorate and in the Arab world, by opposing the march to war. In January Germany took up its turn as a non-permanent member of the Security Council. With both Britain's and the USA's pathetic attempts to find evidence of Iraq's 'weapons of mass destruction', and bolstered by Germany's presence on the Security Council, both France and Russia moved towards open opposition to American war plans. By the time the coalition troops were ready there was not even a majority on UN Security Council prepared to support a 'Second Resolution' sanctioning war.

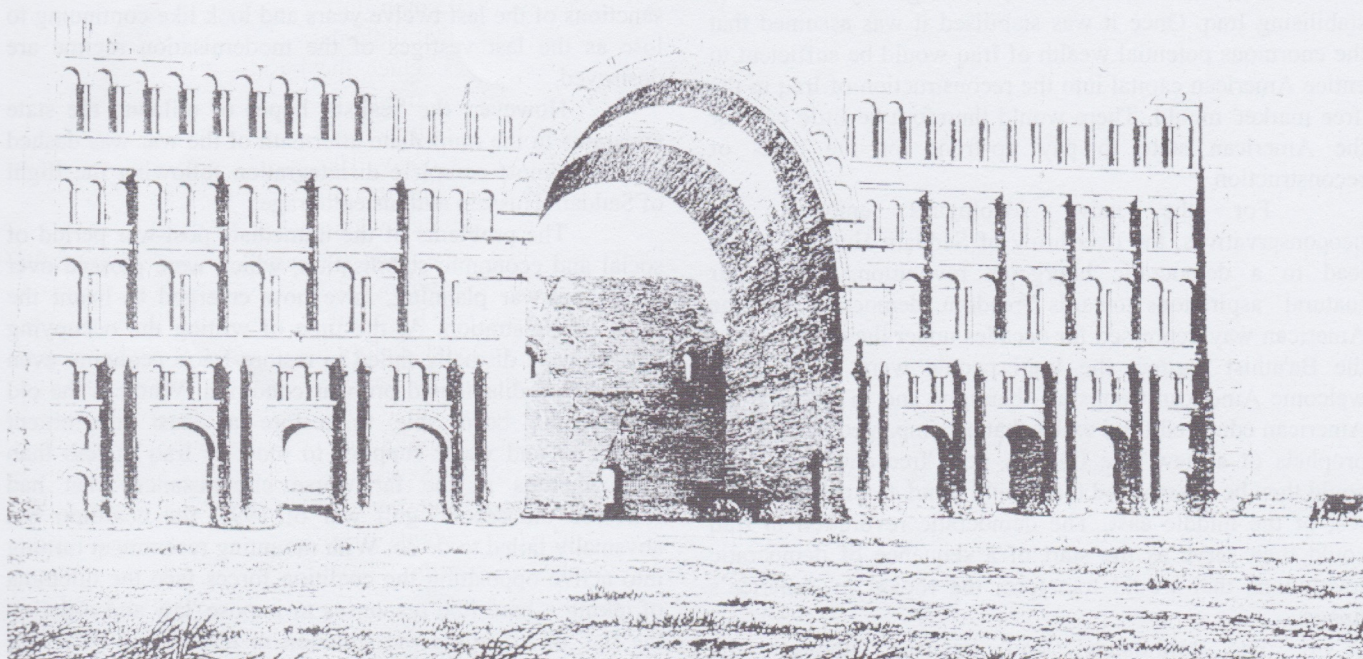


Although the neo-conservatives within the Bush administration had been obliged to swallow the UN route to war it had in the end made little difference. The first item on their agenda - the invasion of Iraq - had been achieved. For the multilateralist in the Bush administration it could be claimed that the war had been sanctioned by Resolution 1441 and the New World Order had remained intact. For the European powers opposed to war had at least shown they were no poodles of US imperialism and had improved their standing both at home and in the Arab world. The main loser, apart of course for the thousands who were going to be killed and maimed in the war, was Tony Blair.

Blair had staked his political reputation, both at home and abroad, on securing a Second a UN resolution. For

of the Iraqi Summer. They had warned of the untested mettle of the Saddam Hussein's elite forces - the Republican Guard and the Special Republican Guard - and they had warned that the coalition's technological supremacy would count for little if it came to capturing Baghdad street by street. For the war's humanitarian critics, it was feared that the war would be like that of 1991: tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians would be killed and many more would be forced to flee their homes. The infrastructure of Iraq would be further destroyed creating the conditions for another 'humanitarian disaster'. For the war's geo-political critics, the war on Iraq would inflame the 'Arab world', which would threaten the stability of the Middle East.

However, despite a few wobbles, exaggerated out of all proportion by the 'embedded media', the war went more



Blair a second resolution would cement the unity of the 'international (bourgeois) community' behind American leadership and convince the Bush administration of the efficacy of staying within multilateralism of the New World Order. At home, the prospect of a Second Resolution provided a rallying point against the mass popular opposition to the war.

Blair's eventual complete failure to obtain a Second Resolution, despite being given more time by the delays in the military build up, meant Blair's entire policy had backfired. The rifts in the 'international (bourgeois) community' were exposed and exacerbated. In his desperation to outflank the Germans and French, Blair was obliged to open up divisions between what Rumsfeld was to describe the New and Old Europe. And at home Blair had to lie and dissemble in the face an unprecedented revolt within his own Party.

#### *The War and its Aftermath*

As with the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq ended with the apparent vindication of the neo-conservatives' unilateralist policies.

The military critics of the war against Iraq had warned of the dangers of the coalition forces being dragged into a long conflict that would mean fighting during the heat

or less according to plan. The war was over in less than three weeks. Uncertain of the loyalty of much of his elite forces Saddam Hussein had been obliged to deploy them outside Baghdad where they had been little more than sitting ducks for the American air force. While the resistance to the American advances in to Baghdad soon crumbled. The targeted and precision attacks of the coalition forces minimised both civilian casualties and damage to Iraq's infrastructure<sup>10</sup>. There was neither a mass exodus of refugees nor was there a humanitarian disaster on the scale of 1991.

While there were major demonstrations through out the Middle East and Middle Eastern governments were obliged to tread very warily in giving any support to the US war effort, no government came close to being overthrown. Indeed, to the extent that the it allowed Arab governments to take up an anti-American posture and divert attention away from their own social problems, it could be argued that the war aided in the maintaining the stability of the Middle East region.

<sup>10</sup>Of course several thousand civilians and unknown numbers of Iraqi soldiers were killed in the war but far less than some had predicted.



However, while the war went according to plan the same can not be said for the 'peace' that followed. Perhaps in order to minimise dissensions both within the Bush administration and between America and its allies, the main focus of planning for the invasion of Iraq concentrated on the one set of objectives around which all could agree - the need to ensure a swift and decisive victory with the minimum of coalition casualties. Far less effort appears to have been spent by war-mongers in Washington in drawing up a plan for post-war Iraq. Indeed, what planning there was seems to have been based more on wishful thinking and propaganda than any serious analysis.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, it was no doubt argued within the counsels for war that a swift and decisive victory, which minimised the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure and avoided a 'humanitarian disaster', would greatly ease task of stabilising Iraq. Once it was stabilised it was assumed that the enormous potential wealth of Iraq would be sufficient to entice American capital into the reconstruction of Iraq in the 'free market' mould. There would therefore be little call for the American state to pay up-front for the costs of reconstruction.

For the naive ideologues amongst the neoconservatives, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would lead to a democratic bourgeois revolution. With their 'natural' aspirations towards 'freedom, democracy and the American way' repressed for decades under the despotism of the Ba'athist regime, the Iraqi people were expected to welcome American troops as liberators, and to embrace the American educated Iraqi exiles that accompanied them as the prophets of a 'new free Iraq'. A new 'free enterprise Iraq' could then be constructed that would stand as a model for the rest of the middle east. The democratic revolution in Iraq could then serve as the start of a sequence of democratic revolutions that would transform the region in America's image.

The 'old-hands' and 'realists' amongst the neoconservatives and within the Bush administration as a whole were less hopeful of a democratic revolution. For them the fall of Saddam Hussein was more likely to lead to the disintegration of Iraq. However, they hoped to be able to 'decapitate' the regime without destroying the state apparatus. By maintaining the former state apparatus, minus its upper echelons, it would be possible to sustain a strong and unified Iraq that would now be pro-American and provide a bases to further isolate Iran<sup>12</sup>.

The different policy conclusions that could be drawn from these two alternative scenarios for the immediate post-war period were potentially in conflict. For example,

should the occupying forces intervene against the 'Iraqi people' in order to shore up the state apparatus? Or should they stand back and let the 'Iraqi people' take their revenge? However, such conflicts never arose since neither scenario arose!

For the coalition forces to be welcomed as liberators would have required mass collective amnesia on the part of the Iraqi population. They would have had to forget the British occupation of the 1920s, the support of Saddam Hussein by successive US governments, the hundreds of thousands killed in the second Gulf war of 1991, the subsequent decade long punitive sanctions imposed by Britain and America and the casualties inflicted in the recent war. Indeed, the middle classes, who would have been most likely to have supported any democratic revolution, were the very classes that had lost most due to war and the economic sanctions of the last twelve years and look like continuing to lose as the last vestiges of the modernisation regime are destroyed.

However, the 'realists' hopes of utilising the state apparatus in the immediate aftermath of the war was dashed with its almost complete disintegration following the flight of Saddam Hussein and his entourage.

The problems of the immediate post-war period of social and economic stabilisation, which were glossed over in the pre-war planning, have now emerged to haunt the Bush administration. At the time of writing the occupying powers have dismally failed to restore Iraq's economy even to its rather dilapidated pre-war condition. Whereas the old regime had been able to restore at least intermittent electricity and water supplies to most of Iraq in less than three months in the far worse circumstances that had followed the second gulf war of 1991, the coalition has abysmally failed to do so. With mounting resentment turning into active opposition the coalition forces face the dilemma of taking a hard-line responses to impose 'law and order' at the risk of inflaming the situation or else sitting back and letting things take their course. Yet if order and security is not imposed soon it seems unlikely that American capital will be enticed to invest in the reconstruction of Iraq.

At the end of the war it had been confidently announced that the stabilisation of Iraq would take only a matter of weeks. A new governing council could then appointed that would have the authority to sanction the selling off of Iraq and allow American capital to begin the 'reconstruction' of Iraq. This would then be ratified with an election within little more than a year. However, this timetable is now in tatters and the occupation of Iraq is descending in a shambles.

Unless the situation in Iraq can be turned around soon, the neoconservative project faces being run into the sands of Iraq. If the cost of the occupation continue to mount at the present rate (presently estimated at over a \$1 billion a week swelling an already ballooning US government budget deficit) and if the body count of American soldiers continues to rise, it will not be long before calls to bring troops home will become irresistible - particularly in the run up to the Presidential elections next year.

The Bush Jnr administration faces the nightmare prospects of being forced in an humiliating withdrawal, which would expose the US as little more than a paper tiger and lead to the dismemberment of Iraq between Turkey and Iran. This would create the very opposite outcome to what

<sup>11</sup> Of course, it was concerns for the problems that might arise after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein that had led to Bush Snr to cut short the war in 1991. The neo-conservatives were no doubt concerned that such fears should get in the way of finishing the job in Iraq this time.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in the run up to the war there were renewed attempts by the Americans to encourage a coup from within Ba'athist Party in order to oust Saddam Hussein. During the war itself there were several well publicised efforts to kill leading members of the Iraq regime. But all these efforts to 'decapitate' the regime so as to leave the state apparatus in tact failed.



the neo-conservatives had wanted. As a consequence, the Bush administration has been forced to go back to the UN to ask for help in the costs of occupying Iraq. But this will mean allowing France, Germany and Russia to get their 'snouts into trough' - amounting to a relapse into the restrictions of multilateralism.

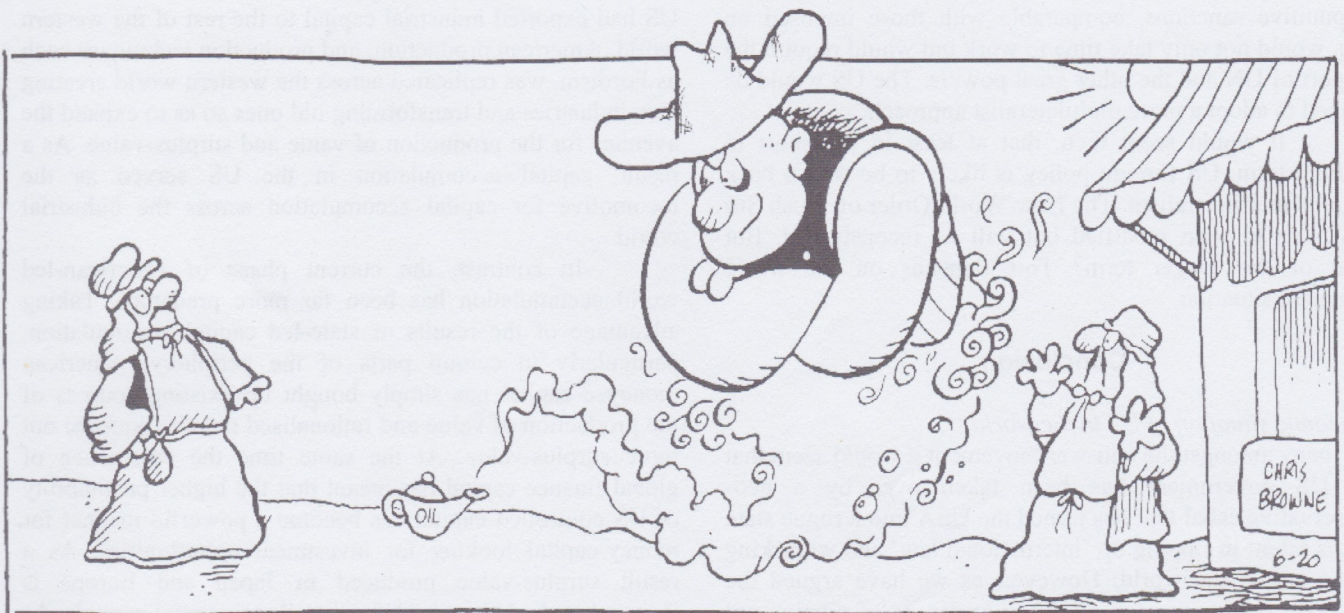
Time would seem to be running out for the neoconservatives. If they are to maintain their political momentum they will have to speed up the progress of their project. However, given the unravelling fiasco in Iraq, any attempt to escape their predicament faces formidable obstacles.

#### *Where next?*

One of the obvious next steps for the neoconservatives to take in order to maintain their political momentum would be to pursue regime change in Iran - which as we have argued is

In the hope of gaining a head start over the US once Iran has been reintegrated into the 'international (bourgeois) community' Britain, like the other major European powers, has consistently advocated a policy of 'constructive engagement', placing its hopes in the reformist policies of Khatami. This has allowed British capital to develop economic interests in Iran unhindered by sanctions.

Secondly, a war against Iran would be far more risky. It is true that the US would have supremacy both at sea and in the air. It would have the options to invade Iran from the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and from Iraq. It is also true that the huge debts and worsening economic situation resulting from the First Gulf war of 1981-88 has meant the Iranian armed forces remain badly equipped and under resourced, and the fervour that led to thousands of young soldiers to make suicidal charges against Iraqi machine gunners is likely to have dissipated. However, in contrast with Iraq, an invasion of Iran would not be simply finishing



the next vital piece in the jigsaw of the Middle East<sup>13</sup>. As soon as the invasion of Iraq was over the Bush administration began stepping up the pressure on Iran over its alleged development of nuclear weapons. Both Iran's nuclear weapons programme and its sponsorship of various 'terrorist' organisations could provide perfect pretexts for the US to go to war with Iran and would probably stand up to much closer scrutiny than the pretexts used to attack Iraq.

However, an invasion of Iran presents serious problems for the Bush administration. Firstly, it would be more difficult than Iraq to build a coalition of the willing for an invasion of Iran. For one, Tony Blair would find it far more difficult to deliver British support for such a project. After Iraq Blair has exhausted his credibility in such affairs. Furthermore, in contrast to Iraq, Britain's policy has been far more closer to that of the rest of Europe with regard to Iran.

<sup>13</sup> Of course the alternative move would be a confrontation with North Korea, which can be seen as part of the neoconservatives long term plan to pre-empt the rise of China as a long term rival to the USA.

off a job already half done. The Iranian armed forces remain undefeated and could well inflict heavy casualties on an American invasion force. Furthermore, once Iran was invaded the USA would then face the prospect of having to occupy indefinitely not only Iraq but also the much larger Iran. Being drawn into a prolonged low intensity conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran would certainly be a nightmare for the US.

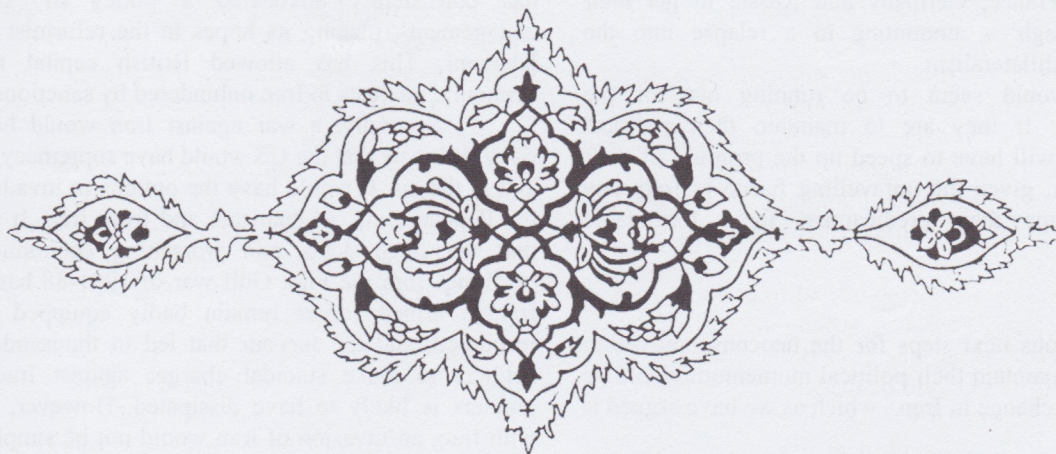
Another option for the neo-conservatives would be to try to promote the overthrow of the Iranian theocracy. There is certainly growing discontent within Iran at the authoritarianism of the regime and growing discontent at the failure of the reforms promised by Khatami. The Bush administration has already begun to encourage anti-regime protests. However, open American support for the opposition in Iran only serves to discredit it, particularly if at the same time the Americans threaten to use force. Indeed, it seems unlikely that an uprising against the regime will come soon enough to rescue the neoconservatives in the Bush administration.

The third option would be to use the pretext of Iran's sponsorship of 'terrorism' or its nuclear weapons



programme to impose punitive sanctions that might eventually destabilise the regime. However, the imposition

accumulation that followed the Second World War, which led to the long-post war boom of the 1950s and 1960s, the



of punitive sanctions, comparable with those imposed on Iraq, would not only take time to work but would require the support of UN and the other great powers. The US would be obliged to adopt a more multilateralist approach.

It would seem then, that at least in the short to medium term, US foreign policy is likely to be drawn back towards multilateralism. The New World Order of Bush Snr will have to be modified but will be reconstituted. But what of the longer term? This depends on the world economic situation.

### Conclusion

#### *Economic situation of US in the world*

For many amongst the anti-war movement it would seem that the US government has been taken over by a neo-conservative cabal that has turned the USA into a rogue state that is intent in ripping up 'international law' and wreaking havoc across the world. However, as we have argued the neo-conservative project is already in danger of running out of steam. As the US economy teeters on the edge of 'deflation', which has only so far been averted by the large scale tax cuts and by cutting interest rates perilously close to zero, the sheer expense of an aggressive unilateral foreign policy is going to appear increasingly unaffordable. The pressure to rein in the aspirations of the neo-conservatives can only grow.

This would seem to lend support to those who have suggested that the adoption of neo-conservative foreign policy is a last desperate attempt by America to use its military power to offset its long term economic decline. However, although the US economy has suffered since the collapse of the dot.com boom and faces an uncertain future it has perhaps fared better than its main rivals. Japan remains mired in more than a decade of economic stagnation, while Europe is slipping into recession. None of its great economic rivals would seem to be in any position to put up a serious challenge to the USA's economic dominance in the short term to medium term.

It is perhaps not so much the relative economic decline of the US that is the problem, but the crisis in the current phase of American-led world accumulation of capital. During the American-led phase of capital

US had exported industrial capital to the rest of the western world. American production, and production techniques such as Fordism, was replicated across the western world creating new industries and transforming old ones so as to expand the avenues for the production of value and surplus-value. As a result, capital accumulation in the US served as the locomotive for capital accumulation across the industrial world.

In contrast, the current phase of American-led world accumulation has been far more predatory. Taking advantage of the results of state-led capital accumulation, particularly in certain parts of the periphery, American moneyed-capital has simply bought up existing sources of the production of value and rationalised them to squeeze out more surplus-value. At the same time the emergence of global finance capital has meant that the higher profitability of US controlled capital has become a powerful magnet for money-capital looking for investment opportunities. As a result surplus-value produced in Japan and Europe is invested in the US, or by US controlled financial capitals. As a consequence, the rate of capital accumulation in Japan and Europe has declined. Hence, the accumulation of American capital has been at the expense of the accumulation of capital in the rest of the world, and increasingly so in Europe and Japan.

However, up until recently the potential tensions and conflicts that have emerged due to the predatory nature of the current phase of American-led world accumulation have been containable within the institutions of global governance. This is true of both the relation between the US and the rest of the more advanced economies and between 'developed North' and the 'undeveloped South'

For much of the 1990s the ruling classes of the 'emerging market economies' were well rewarded for abandoning any aspirations towards independent national accumulation and instead acting as mere agents for international capital. Although for large sections of the population in these 'emerging market economies' the adoption of neo-liberal policies led to increased job insecurity, cuts in public provision of health, education and welfare, and sharp falls in real wages; for the ruling classes, and for many of their middle class allies, the influx of foreign capital, which such policies attracted, provided ample



opportunities to make substantial material gains. For the ruling classes of the rest of the 'developing world' the aim was to get in on the act by positioning themselves to be the next country to be recognised by global capital as an 'emerging market economy'.

As a result, most of the ruling classes of the periphery fully embraced the neo-liberal 'Washington Consensus' and were anxious to be integrated into the 'international (bourgeois) community'. They queued up to join the World Trade Organisation and uncritically accepted the one-sided agenda of 'free trade' dictated by the US and Europe.

However, the pickings to be had from the carcass of failed national accumulation was strictly limited. Once its industries had been 'rationalised' and its public utilities privatised the profits that could be made out of an 'emerging market economy' began to dry up. Even in East Asia, where there had been substantial investment in productive capital, the advantages of having a cheap and compliant labour force was soon undercut by the next wave of newly 'emerging market economies' and by an increasingly oversupplied world market for manufactured commodities.

As a result of past inflows of international capital the 'emerging market economies' faced a remorsefully growing outflow of profits, interest and debt repayments to the US and its confederates in the West, which could only be covered by an increasingly speculative and short term inflows of money-capital, which was now pursuing diminishing returns. In 1997 the crunch came with financial crisis of East Asia, which soon spread across the world's 'emerging market economies'. The ruling classes of these economies now found themselves castigated for corruption and cronyism by their brethren in the West and faced with the task of imposing severe austerity measures in the face of growing social discontent while the Western bankers and speculators were bailed out of their difficulties by the IMF.

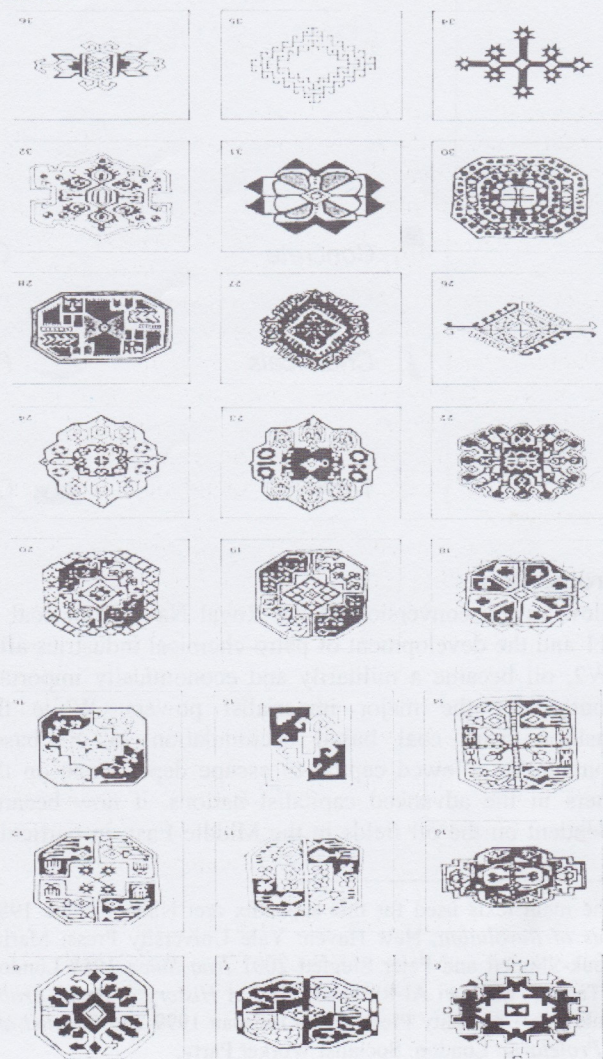
As a result, the ruling classes of the periphery have become far more circumspect about the advantages of neo-liberalism and free trade preached by the US and Europe. A growing division has emerged within the 'international (bourgeois) community' between the 'rich North' and the 'poor South', which, has markedly slowed down the attempts to advance 'free trade and neo-liberalism through the multilateral institutions such as the WTO. Following the breakdown of the Seattle meeting of the WTO, the US was been obliged to shift towards advancing its agenda for 'free trade' and liberalisation through bilateral agreements in attempt to divide and rule an increasingly recalcitrant bourgeoisie in the peripheries.

These bilateral agreements were presented as 'paving the way' for more comprehensive multilateral agreements to be negotiated in future WTO meetings. However, following the recent collapse of the Cancun meeting of the WTO these bilateral agreements are likely to become more of an alternative than a complement to multilateralism of US trade policy.

However, perhaps more importantly than this 'North-South' divide is the relation between the US and Europe. As we have pointed out, the free movement of capital has meant that large sections of the the European bourgeoisie have been able to buy into the success of American capital. At the same time the strong dollar since the mid-1990s has allowed European exporters to share in

the expansion of the American economy. As a result there has been a strong commitment on the part of the European bourgeoisie to maintaining the regime of American-led global accumulation. Indeed, the need to compete with America has provided a powerful argument for many within the European bourgeoisie for the adoption of neo-liberal policies and for attacking the entrenched positions of the European working class.

However, the end of the dot.com boom has led to a sharp slow down in the US economy. Although expansionary fiscal and monetary policies have allowed the US to avoid an economic slump, the American economy is presently teetering on verge of a prolonged period of economic stagnation. The slow down in the US economy, together with a weakening dollar, has already lead to stagnation in many of the major European economies. It is possible that the destruction of capital in the recent slow down of the US economy may be sufficient to allow it a further brief economic surge. However, if the US enters a period of economic stagnation then fate of much of Europe is likely to be worse. As competition for stagnant or even shrinking world markets intensifies, calls for protectionism will mount on both sides of the Atlantic, placing great strains on the world economic order. Indeed it could be well be that just as America's aggressively unilateralist military interventionism is running into an impasse, the multilateral system of 'globalised economy' could begin to break up if the US fails to escape being dragged down into chronic deflation.





## Appendix: Oil wars and new world orders in historical context



### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Following the conversion of the Royal Navy from coal in 1911 and the development of petro-chemical industries after WW2, oil became a militarily and economically important resource for the major imperialist powers. While the transition from coal based accumulation to oil based accumulation allowed capital to escape dependence on the miners in the advanced capitalist nations, it now became dependent on the oil fields in the Middle East; in particular

the Gulf region which after the establishment of the oil industry in Iran in 1909, Iraq in 1925 and Saudi Arabia in 1933, came to be seen as *the world's most strategic area to control*.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, however, the most strategic area of the world for the West became its most troublesome.. By 1991 Iran was governed by an Islamist regime and Iraq by the secular national-socialist Ba'ath party- both of which were virulently anti-Western. Similarly, Saudi Arabia was riddled by social crisis which would fuel Saudis' dissent against the

<sup>1</sup> The main texts used for this appendix are: Nikki Keddie 1981, *Roots of Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett 2001 *Iraq Since 1958* London: I.B.Tauris; Madawi Al-Rasheed 2002 *A History of Saudi Arabia* Cambridge University Press; Chris Harman 1999 *The Prophet and the Proletariat* London: Socialist Worker Party.

<sup>2</sup> Besides the oil fields in the former Soviet Union, which had been so far outside the control of the US and Europe, the twelve world's mega-fields (those with reserves over 1000 million barrels) are all in the Middle East: five in Iran, two in Iraq, one in Kuwait, three in Saudi Arabia and one in Libya.



regime's commitment to the US during the Second Gulf War. This crisis would later lead to the world-wide emergence of small Islamist guerrilla groups, mainly composed of Saudis financed both directly and indirectly by the Saudi state. This problematic state of affairs in the Gulf is not just a co-incidental misfortune, but the result of contradictions created by the subsumption of the Middle East into the world market, the effect of the creation of new nation states and oil interests in the Gulf; kept alive through the direct and indirect support of the Western powers.

### **The effect of western industrial capitalism on the social relations of the Middle East**

Up until the XIXth century, the mode of production in the Middle East was determined by the coexistence of merchant capital in the towns and cities and nomadic pastoralism in the desert areas. The urban centres' economy was mercantile and artisanal, organised around pre-capitalist guild structures where there was no dynamic of capital expansion. The desert regions were populated by nomadic tribes, structured along kinship relations and organised in networks known as tribal confederations. In an area of the world characterised by desert or mountainous areas with limited fertile lands, mobility and military prowess was more important than productivity in raising livestock. Indeed, the tribes that were best fitted for war and raids were the most powerful.

Islam was the dominant religion in the Middle East. It arose in the VII century in the Arabian peninsula, as a socio-cultural phenomenon and as a system of power which served to resolve the contradictions brought about by the development of trade within a nomadic environment. Successful trading relations of the urban centres depended on the security of trading routes and these were under constant threat of raids by the nomads. Islam reconciled the needs of trade with the interests of the nomadic tribes. In fact it provided the base for the creation of religious based empires that, on the one hand, could impose Islamic law and order in their territory and on the other, enrolled nomadic tribes as their military force in the 'holy' wars (*jihad*) of expansion. By the XIX century, the great Islamic expansions were over. The Ottoman Empire- based on the Sunni sect of Islam- ruled over most of the Middle East, including the area of modern Iraq and the coasts of Saudi Arabia. Iran was ruled by the dynasty of the Qajars which championed the Shi'a sect of Islam. Both the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar dynasty gave the tribes plenty of autonomy and the right to collect revenues from the settled agriculturists. In return the tribal leaders restrained their followers from attacking merchants' caravans. This system was at the root of the creation of hierarchies of tribes, with 'noble' tribes of warriors dominating over weaker pastoral tribes and settled communities.

During the XIXth century the Persian Gulf began to feel the impact of Western industrial capitalist mode of production. While the Ottoman Empire was largely hostile to the West, Britain managed to develop good relations with the Qajar Shah of Iran. It obtained favourable trade agreements and concessions in return for the exploitation of Iranian resources and crops. By the late XIX century, after the opening of the Suez Canal, Western interests extended to

Iraq. However Saudi Arabia, being mostly a desert and easily avoidable by coastal trade routes, was left unaffected.

Like most regions of what was to become known as the undeveloped world, the main relation of Western industrial capitalism to the Gulf was mediated through the dominance of mercantile capital, which would serve as bridge and agent of the West. Its success depended on maintaining traditional stable social and political conditions locally, yet paradoxically it had a destabilising effect by undermining traditional authorities through its monetarisation of their underlying social relations.

The pressure of the Western economy manifested itself in two ways. Firstly the Middle East came to be seen as a potential market for Western industrial products and secondly the western market encouraged their production and export of agricultural goods such as wheat, opium and tobacco, the consequences of which contributed to the destabilisation of the local social system. It did this in two ways. Firstly, the exposure of the urban centres to Western industrial products, whilst benefiting a small élite of long distance merchants, threatened the economy of the small traders and artisans of the urban markets (*bazaars*), causing discontent and resentment in the urban populations. This resentment was shared by the clergy, who had prospered on the tithes and religious gifts paid by the guilds. Secondly, the West's demand for crop production encouraged many nomadic tribes to settle and transform themselves into cultivators which meant they lost their traditional power derived from their mobility. The traditional tribal relations were increasingly replaced by new social relations based on economic exploitation. Tribal leaders began to lose their legitimacy in the eyes of their fellow tribesmen when they began to transform themselves into absentee landlords leaving the tribesman to become impoverished tenants. All this led to the disintegration of the tribal confederation, which, having guaranteed social stability for centuries, had far-reaching consequences. A further destabilising factor was introduced by the switch in agriculture from production for subsistence to monoculture production for the market, which made the economy increasingly dependent on international markets and therefore subject to crisis.

### **The effect on the social relations of the Middle East through the creation of new nation states**

In the XXth century the imperialist powers sought to increase their economic influence in the Gulf by military and political intervention. With the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire after WW1, and the Sèvres peace treaty of 1920, Britain and France were given a mandate to establish nation states in the Middle East. This allowed the West to exercise more power in the region.<sup>3</sup> The British military and diplomatic intervention in the Gulf (Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia) had important socio-economic consequences. In order to maintain control they generally employed the strategy of supporting traditional élites and authorities of the region, and in doing so they helped revive old powers that were already being undermined by the impact of western

<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Palestine and trans Jordan was given under the British mandate, whilst Syria and Lebanon were given to the French.



industrialism in the economic sphere. Indeed British efforts to sustain and maintain the old social order actually contributed to its destabilisation.

In Iraq, Britain aimed to install a regime that would support them. The population of the urban centres were mostly hostile to the imperialist power, with the exception of

social base, by creating a middle class urban élite and marginalising the clergy, who threatened to mobilise anti-Western sentiments. Furthermore the creation of a modern army allowed the State to attack the surviving nomad tribes and force them to settle.

Iran took advantage of the international crisis of 1929



few merchants tied to Western markets. In order to consolidate the social base of the new regime, Britain sought to shore up the power of the tribal leaders by creating a conservative élite based on land ownership. The British-supported 'Lazmah' land reforms of 1932 effectively completed the transformation of the tribal leaders from tribute receivers into landowners, thereby increasing their economic power.<sup>4</sup> These reforms, however, also served to accelerate the process of fragmentation of tribal relations, thereby further destabilising the traditional social order. Furthermore the establishment of private property in the rural areas had the effect of dispossessing agriculturists from common land. This led to discontent which would later encourage widespread migration to the cities, altering the traditional urban social structure.

At the end of WWI Iran faced popular revolts triggered by economic crisis and inspired by the Russian Revolution. This encouraged Britain and the US to support a coup that would re-impose order with the use of force which led to the establishment of the pro-western Shah Reza Khan. As in Iraq, the new regime sought to bolster the economic power of the landlords by introducing land reforms which formalised the landlords' power over the land as private property. On the other hand, in order to regain control of the cities, the new State sought to 'modernise' which mainly involved the creation of white collar state jobs, education for a small minority, the secularisation of legislation and state institutions and the creation of a modern army. 'Modernisation' provided a way for the regime to redefine its

by taking steps towards a state-led industrial 'development'. This project, however, was not aimed at developing the bulk of national production and trade rather it created a handful of large industries which survived only thanks to both state intervention and the creation of state monopolies. By WW2 the Iranian regime was successfully based on a conservative élite consisting in long distance merchants, a few big industrial capitalists dependent on the state, landowners, and a small middle class of state functionaries. It shared with Britain an interest in maintaining the social and political *status quo*, the cohesion of which was guaranteed by revenues from oil royalties paid by the British-owned oil industry, established in 1909. However the British economic influence made Iran's economy dependent on international market prices and prone to crisis, as well as undermining the economy of the urban centres through competition with its products. Like everywhere else in the Gulf, the contradictions created by the British presence in Iran would have explosive consequences in the future.

Another consequence of the weakening and collapse of the Ottoman Empire and of the direct British intervention in the Gulf was the emergence of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was formed as a result of the expansion of the emirate of Ibn Sa'ud from central Arabia outward and the submission of the dominant tribal confederations of the peninsula to Saudi rule.<sup>5</sup> The expansion and subsequent stabilisation of the kingdom was encouraged and supported by Britain.

<sup>4</sup> The Lazmah completed the process began by the Ottoman Empire with the tanzimat reforms.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Sa'ud was the descendant of Mohammed ibn Sa'ud who expanded his territory in the XVIII century (see Box)



The newly formed kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the most extreme case of an anachronistic and unstable system that could only be created and maintained due to British intervention. The Saudi expansion was carried out by tribal forces which, like the pre-capitalist emirates of the past, were rewarded with the spoils of war. The expansionist war was ideologically justified as a *jihad* to spread Wahhabism - a 200 year old puritan and revivalist version of Islamism

However, since this dynamic developed within new international relations between bourgeois states, this altered its very 'tribal' nature. When Sa'ud's tribal warriors reached the borders of British-controlled territories (such as Kuwait) the contradiction of Sa'ud's dominion was exposed. Sa'ud's war depended on the military prowess of the tribes and yet his legitimisation also depended on the West's acceptance and support. Unfortunately, lacking both a modern army and the structure of a modern State, Sa'ud had no means of controlling the tribes he had unleashed, who were now demanding to continue the Wahhabi *jihad* across the borders. The suppression of the eventual tribal revolt and the stabilisation of Saudi Arabia could only be achieved through British intervention in the form of the Royal Air Force. In the years that followed, Saudi Arabia managed to dismantle its tribe-based army and replace it with a national guard, and after WWII it would increasingly depend on US military and technical aid for its defence.

The Saudi State was born as a tribal one that contradictorily had to force its tribes into settling thereby depriving them of the very source of their material reproduction - the raids. The pacification of the tribe had to be supported by State subventions that were financed by borrowing money from abroad and later by the revenues of oil. The subventions had the effect of sustaining tribal structures along patterns of privilege defined by genealogical belonging - a structure that would increasingly cause resentment in large layers of society. In this way the direct political and military influence of Britain, and, later, the revenues from oil production and the military support of the US, created and maintained an unstable social system at odds with its material conditions of existence.

### The impact of oil

The capitalist mode of production and the Western imperialist power had caused destabilisation and dissatisfaction in large sections of the population in the Gulf; as well as inspiring anti-western feelings in the urban populations of Iraq and Iran. These transformations were further exacerbated by the impact of the oil industry in the Gulf.

The discovery of abundant oil reserves in the Gulf transformed it into a region of vital interest to the West. As we have seen, the Western powers sought to maintain social relations in the Gulf after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, that would not threaten their interests. All that the oil industry needed was to secure access to the oil fields which could be guaranteed by a compliant, stable local power. The stabilisation of the Gulf states into anachronistic structures of power dominated by small conservative élites (in opposition to the dissatisfied masses) acted in the interest of the oil industry. By WW2, and increasingly since, the royalties paid to the monarchs by the oil companies principally served to

maintain their power against the threat of social crisis. In fact, the nature of the oil industry, which in itself was a self contained industry with few links to the rest of the national economy, allowed the dominant élites to survive in power and neglect or impede internal industrial development with no counter-effects on their gains and interests.<sup>6</sup>

However, while on the one hand the social stabilisation of the Gulf was a condition for the development of the oil industry, on the other it produced conditions which were to act as a catalyst for the emergence of important social movements that shook Iran in the 50s and Iraq in the 60s. In fact, unlike in America, the oil industry did not develop through the appropriation of land and mineral rights. Rather, a single foreign company (or consortiums of foreign companies) received concessions from the monarch to exploit the whole country.<sup>7</sup> It was this particular arrangement that allowed all the social forces opposing the existing regimes in Iran and Iraq to unite in a common struggle against the west around the issue of oil nationalisation. The economic importance of oil meant that it could be seen as something worth reclaiming as 'national' wealth, against the interests of the imperialist West. Thus, in both Iran and Iraq the issue of oil nationalisation offered a focus for the discontent already felt by different sections of the urban populations. It appealed to the already existing anti-Western sentiments of the petty bourgeoisie of the *bazaars*, who had fought to defend their traditional economy against the perceived ravages of modernisation. It appealed to sections of the military and middle class intellectuals, who saw the oil revenues as a means of introducing liberal reforms and delivering limited 'social justice' without affecting property relations. And lastly, the issue of oil nationalisation appealed to the emerging and increasingly combative urban proletariat, who demanded more radical social change. Thus sections of society with diverging interests could find themselves allied against one enemy: the West.

### The radical impact of oil in the 40s and 50s in Iran and Iraq

The 40s and 50s thus saw massive popular movements, pivoting around the issue of oil nationalisation. In both Iran and Iraq union activity, protests and strikes, (above all in the oil industry) threatened social peace and the economy of the established order. In tandem with these struggles, the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party in Iran and the Iraqi Communist Party in

<sup>6</sup> As an example, by 1958 in Iraq manufacture constituted only the 10% of the GNP.

<sup>7</sup> The concession for the exploration of the whole Iran was given by the Qajars to the British William Knox d'Arcy in 1901; this was followed by the discovery of oil (1908) and by the constitution of the Anglo Persian Oil Company (APOC, 1909), which became almost fully owned by the British government in 1914. A concession for the exploitation of the North of Iran was given by Shah Reza Khan to the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey in 1921. The concession of Iraq was given in 1925 by the monarch of Iraq Faysal to the Turkish Petroleum Company (later renamed Iraq Petroleum Company, IPC), owned by Britain and other European countries. And the concession of Saudi Arabia was given in 1933 by Sa'ud to the US Standard Oil of California (SOCAL) (oil was extracted from 1938).



Iraq (ICP) developed their organisations and emerged as leading forces, obtaining mass support from the growing urban proletariat, the clerical workers, and parts of the intelligentsia. However, in the heat of social unrest elements of the middle class, inspired by liberal ideals but uncomfortable with the demands of both the Communist parties and the masses, took power and attempted to recuperate the struggles.

In Iran in 1951, a small liberal party led by Mohammed Mossadeq was able to gain massive electoral support to re-impose social peace on the issue of oil nationalisation. Once in power, he was obliged to carry it out. However his attempts were thwarted by an international blockade organised by the British. The blockade plunged Iran into economic crisis. The crisis served to re-invigorate those proletarian struggles that Mossadeq's power had been supposed to recuperate. Mossadeq responded with open repression, eventually alienating the support of the Tudeh party, which the regime needed to maintain its power against the pressure of the conservative *bazaars* and the military.

Iraq had been shaken by mass protests and strikes in the 40s and 50s. With the '1958 Revolution' the 'Free Officers' led by liberal officer Abd al-Karim Qassem seized power obtaining the support of the urban masses and the ICP. With 'law 80' in 1961 Qassem reasserted State sovereignty over Iraqi oil. However, his efforts were nullified both by lack of technical know-how and constraint exercised by the monopoly of the Oil Majors over oil processing and distribution.<sup>8</sup>

Although the revolution was welcomed by everybody opposed to the old ruling classes and united by anti-western feelings, as soon as the old regime was overthrown the popular movement that had arisen in support of the new government began to split. anti-Communist forces, (based on sections of the middle classes, the petty bourgeoisie of the *bazaars* and the right wing of the army) urged the State to distance itself from the ICP through an invocation of Pan-Arabist ideology. Pan-Arabism had been an ideology shared by intellectuals and military officers in many Arab countries. It invoked the unity of all Arab nations against Western imperialism, and provided an alternative modernising ideology to Stalinism. The Iraqi Pan-Arabist urged Qassem to embrace the ideal of Arab unification and join the unification of Egypt and Syria since it had already proved itself successful in the repression of communist movements in Egypt and Syria. This was an unrealistic ideal (in fact the union between Egypt and Syria did not last long) since the ideology of Pan-Arabism lacked any strong social base being rooted only in the intelligentsia and the army. In contrast the growth of the Communist party was supported by many layers of Iraqi society. As a result Qassem sought to reach a deal with the ICP in order to provide much needed popular support for his regime. He did this by appealing to an 'Iraqi

national' identity which opposed the pan-Arabist fusion with, or submission to, Egypt.

That it was impossible for the liberal forces in Iran and Iraq to maintain themselves in power without having to compromise with the Communists, was the result of the underdevelopment in the previous two decades. This variously impeded the formation of a strong local industrial bourgeoisie, a stable middle class interested in building a compliant labour force, and the creation of political institutions that could create a national 'consensus' around liberal issues. In the face of continuing social unrest and the West's fear that the Gulf would turn towards the Soviet Union, the anti-Communist forces regrouped and staged a coup d'état in both countries.<sup>9</sup> In Iran in 1953 Mossadeq was removed by the military and a mob from Teheran's *bazaar* and the Shah (Mohammed Reza) was restored to power. This coup was financially supported by the US through the CIA, and the US made sure to maintain its control of Iran afterwards, through military and administrative advisors. In Iraq in 1963 Qassem was removed by a coup organised by the right wing of the army and a small unorganised national-socialist party - the Ba'ath. In 1968 the Ba'ath party took full control of the State.

### The new era of oil boom

These new regimes did not reverse the process of oil nationalisation initiated by their predecessors. After the fall of Mossadeq, Iran was able to obtain formal recognition of the nationalisation (with the concession rewritten as a lease) and a 50-50 share of oil, which became 75-25 in its favour in 1958. In Iraq, the Ba'ath championed the ideals of anti-imperialism that were still popular among the masses and sought to nationalise oil. By pursuing a policy of alignment with the Soviet Union, the Ba'ath earned the technical aid necessary for the effective nationalisation of oil in 1969.

During the 60s the outlook for the oil producing countries seemed to change with the formation of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960. OPEC was set up with the aim of co-ordinating the export policies of its member states in an attempt to regulate oil prices. It also aided the formation of the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) in 1968. However, the policies of OPEC/OAPEC only brought short term benefits since their efforts to regulate oil price in the international market were disrupted by non-OPEC oil producers. In any case, the oil shortage in the 70's hit America allowing OPEC to successfully raise the price of oil in its favour. This broke the monopoly of the oil giants over production and distribution, which contributed to the effective nationalisation of oil in the Middle Eastern countries.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Qassem's liason with the Soviet Union had worried the US, so much that in 1959 the CIA's director Allen Dulles declared that the situation in Iraq under Qassem was 'the most dangerous in the world'!

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, only in the 70s Iraq achieved oil nationalisation. Similar, in 1973 Saudi Arabia acquired 25% of ARAMCO, which became 60% the following year; and in 1980 Saudi Arabia took over the whole company.

<sup>11</sup> This modernisation followed on from the process of land reform started in the 60s.

<sup>8</sup> The law 80 of 1961 withdrew the concessions held by the IPC in all Iraq, with the exception of the limited areas that were already being exploited by then (the 0.5% of the national territory), laying the basis for the creation of a national company which could exploit the rest of the country. In 1964 the Iraqi National Oil Company was in fact created, but it was ineffective for lack of technical know-how.



The oil boom of the 70s and the increasing State control over oil production in the Gulf delayed the inevitable explosion of the contradictions existing in Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The bolstered state revenues were used to pacify the populations. While all countries boosted white collar jobs in the civil services, in Iraq and Iran this also took the form of investment in economic development, with large scale agricultural modernisation in Iran and the encouragement of small and medium business in Iraq through national development projects.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand Saudi Arabia had been the most unwilling and unable to allow for economic or social reforms. Its social structure still reflected the old tribal system while the redistributive role of the State had the effect of freezing both social and economic development. Unlike Iraq, Saudi Arabia did not patronise development in production to any great extent, rather the



*Wahhabi agilis*

new system, with its generous welfare benefits and a profusion of white collar State jobs, was simply a re-definition of the old distributive rentier State in the context of an oil bonanza.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> While white collar jobs were offered to Saudi educated citizens as a form of State support, Saudi Arabia depended on foreign labour force - on Western workers for skilled jobs and on Arab migrants for menial jobs.

<sup>13</sup> A similar law was passed by Qassem in Iraq, which similarly failed in its aims.

<sup>14</sup> Shi'i opposition emerged also in Iraq, where the Shi'i had been marginalised since the Ottoman times.

<sup>15</sup> Saudi Arabia was also worried about the Afghani refugees falling under the influence of their big competitor, and the enemy of the US, the Shiite Iran. The Saudi's for this reason spent a lot of money

Together with the carrot of state patronage (in the case of Iraq and Saudi Arabia), the regimes of all the three countries in the Gulf used the stick of repression against left-wing, religious and secularist opposition. In particular, Iran and Iraq developed efficient security services which prevented the re-organisation of mass parties. But while the Bathist regime used its patronage of whole sections of the population to divide the opposition, as witnessed by the partial co-option of the ICP and the integration of the urban poor, the Shah carried out a program of systematic repression which united his enemies.

### The emergence of the anti-Western Shi'a regime in Iran

Up until 1979, the Iranian regime still relied on US and Western support. Massive state expenditure was invested in the purchase of advanced military equipment from the West. Funds were spent on education and an expanding civil service with the aim of swelling the middle class. However clumsy attempts at industrial development only served to push Iran into deeper crisis.

By 1977 dissatisfaction was widespread among both the rural workers and the landowners, because of land reforms introduced by the State during the past decade. These reforms had been introduced to modernise labour relations in the countryside and distributing a portion of the landlord's property amongst the peasants. They were not only opposed by the landowners but also by the peasants who had to pay for the reappropriation in cash which could only be raised by producing for the market as opposed to production for subsistence.<sup>13</sup> The urban proletariat was augmented by migrations from the countryside caused by the resulting social upheaval. With a new economic crisis hitting the country in 1977, this generalised popular discontent exploded in the '1979 Revolution'.

The opposition to the Shah was thus composed of both conservative sections of society, such as the urban *bazaars* and landowners, as well as parts of the urban proletariat, the middle class and the intelligentsia who opposed the Shah by demanding liberal or social reforms. They were united against the US-backed regime of the State in the name of anti-imperialism.

In fact, the Revolution was initially fought by left-wing groups alongside the Shiite fundamentalist Islamic Republican Party (IRP), an alliance between the clergy and the *bazaari* merchants. The IRP's nostalgia for a pre-development *bazaar* exerted strong appeal to those who saw the regime of the Shah, bowing down to the interests of the US, and its efforts to 'modernise', as a failure. The Shiite fundamentalist cause acquired prestige from a spectacular occupation of the American embassy. At the same time they



managed to create a middle class base for their support, by seizing control of newly formed public institutions and rewarding their supporters with key positions. They were also successful in organising urban youths into street gangs (the *Hizbollah*), and engaged them in imposing Islamic customs on the passer-by. The enthusiasm conveyed by IRP's street actions and the appeal of anti-US rhetoric is not enough to explain the Shiite fundamentalism success with the proletariat. One reason for the IRP's success was that it filled the void left by the secular and left-wing opposition which had been crushed through decades of repression. While under the shah left-wing organisations were dismantled and forced underground, the mosques had been available to the proletariat for socialising and organising. Once the IRP, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, was in full control of the State, it unleashed systematic repression against what remained of the left-wing and secular groups who had participated in the Revolution.

### The crisis of the oil monarchs and the rise of Islamism

The high price of oil of the 70s had led to increased investment in developing and expanding oil production. Higher cost non-OPEC oil fields (e.g. those in Alaska and the North Sea) grew, and the increased production began to come on stream at the beginning of the 1980s. Meanwhile, the demand of oil fell after the efforts in the developed countries to implement systems for the conservation of energy. The resulting fall of the oil price in the early 80s hit the State budgets of the three major countries in the Gulf, leading to increasing social discontent.

The first Gulf war from 1981 to 1988 between Iran and Iraq served to deal with the threat of social unrest in both countries. The mass deaths in the war fields and the state of national emergency within the two States allowed the two regimes to crush their internal oppositions and thin out the proletariat.

For Saudi Arabia, the 80s were a period of social and political crisis that the regime could not easily defuse. Despite the generosity of the Saudi welfare provisions in the previous decade, the distribution of wealth amongst the population had remained unequal and continued to reflect old patterns of privilege and hierarchies. With the fall of oil price in the 80s, the State was obliged to cut back on its welfare provisions, the already existing discontent of the Saudi population deepened.

In the face of the various waves of pan-Arabism and anti-imperialism, it had been important for the Saudi regime to stress its Islamic origins. To do this it enrolled the more moderate part of the clergy, those willing to accept modernisation, into the state apparatus. However, the fervent and coherent anti-US and Islamic stance of the Shi'i Iranian leadership served to expose Saudi Arabia's markedly un-Islamic foreign policy and led to growing criticism.

This criticism would reach its climax during the Gulf war in 1990, when, fearing Iraqi invasion into their oil reserves in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia had to recur to US military support subsequently allowing its territory to be used for attacking Iraq.

The Iranian Revolution also brought on the scene Shi'ism as an alternative Islamist rhetoric which exerted a

strong appeal on the Shi'i communities - one of the most marginalised social groups in Saudi Arabia. Shi'ism emerged as a focus of political opposition, with religious festivals ending in clashes with the police and with the organisation of clandestine groups.<sup>14</sup> Yet Islamic opposition to the regime grew also within the dominant sect of Wahhabism. Islamism was used to criticize the 'Islamic' regime, particularly by intellectuals and young unemployed, often educated in the Saudi religious schools.

The Islamic opposition did not raise a purely religious or political issues but economic and social ones as well: in fact, it did not only attack the pro-US and pro-West policies of the Saudi State - but also condemned the oligarchic character of the State and its inequalities; and it demanded more money for welfare, education and health services. Whilst the Saudi opposition was forced abroad by the regime, it managed to obtain increasing sympathy from the institutional clergy.

Islamic fundamentalism was not only a problem for Saudi Arabia. One of the most notorious Islamic fundamentalist organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood had been influential in Egypt in the end of the 40s. The 70s and 80s saw a re-emergence of radical Islam throughout the Middle East as a form of political expression of social dissatisfaction. With radical Islam the concept of *jihad* had a revival within a modern framework - *jihad* could simply be the action of guerrilla groups against their own States or the West, based on individual's fervour and small groups organisations. It was not a war for the extension of a territory but an individual action having predominantly a symbolic political meaning.

The Afghan war which opposed the local Muslim population to the occupying Soviet force in 1979 offered, to many States of the Middle East, the opportunity to try and get rid of their indigenous Islamist trouble makers<sup>15</sup>. Arab States, including Saudi Arabia, encouraged ardent Muslim youth to leave their country and go and martyr themselves in a *jihad* against the Communist 'infidel' in Afghanistan. The US played an important role in training and sponsoring this newly formed Islamist militant forces. But Saudi Arabia had an important role also, by sponsoring and encouraging Islamists. It was the Saudi government, for example, that sent Osama Bin Laden to Afghanistan, and funded his operations.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Osama Bin Laden was one of these 'homeless' militants. Born into a rich family that had made its fortune in the construction industry, the Saudi born billionaire, whose activities in Afghanistan were supported by the Saudi State during the 80's began to turn on his sponsors. In the months preceding Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 Bin Laden adamantly opposed the Saudi decision to call in 'infidel' troops led by the US to defend the Saudi frontier from the posturing of Saddam Hussein. As a result he was expelled from Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden's rhetoric was not only directed against the US 'infidel's but also against the Saudi ruling dynasty whom he accuses of being 'indebted' to both the devout middle classes and the higher social strata of the kingdom-his own class, whom he refers to as the 'great merchants'. Despite not claiming responsibility for a number of 'terrorist' attacks against 'infidels' Bin Laden has come to represent and be seen as accountable for the actions of the *jihadists*.



With the withdrawal of the Russians from Afghanistan in 1992 and a change in American public opinion and policy, the US stopped its support to the Islamist militant groups. The States of the Middle East, afraid that the Islamist extremism they helped create could be directed against them, closed their borders to the *Mujahadeen*. This left groups of exiled fundamentalist *jihadi*, with a growing resentment of the US who had 'used' them for their own ends, to find new wars to fight in other countries on behalf of fellow Muslims ( e.g Bosnia, Algeria and Egypt). With the attack on Iraq in the 90s, these Muslim groups directed their efforts against the US, turning the *jihad* into guerrilla actions. Islamist *jihadi* created international links, one of which was Al Qaida. And it was a 'homeless' worldwide network of ex-fighters in Afghanistan that was responsible for the WTO bombing in 1993, while a group tied to Al Qaida was responsible of the final destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001.

Much of the finance for Islamic fundamentalists throughout the world came from Saudi Arabia. Whether this money comes from individual wealthy elements of Saudi society; or from the Saudi State budget itself through religious 'donations' paid by the clergy; in either case this fact casts a deep shadow on the trustworthiness of Saudi Arabia for the US.

A social crisis in Saudi Arabia is thus at the roots of an Islamic fundamentalist movement that is currently targeting the US and the West with 'dramatic' guerrilla actions. We have seen that this crisis has been the outcome of the creation and stabilisation in Saudi Arabia of an archaic social system, which had no other material conditions for its existence and reproduction except for the oil rent and the support of Western countries. This dependence has made the Saudi system dramatically dependent on both the oil price in the international markets and the skilled and technical input from West. The contradictions of such a system have emerged in their full extent with the fall of the oil prices in the 80s, which has created increasing unemployment and hardship and have destabilised the social status quo. In the case of Iran and Iraq, the effects of the Western influence in Iran and Iraq have triggered a chain of social events that has led to the establishment of two anti-US States. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the impact of the West and of the interests of the oil industry has led to a country that is currently incubating big troubles for the West and in particular for the US.

### Conclusions

On the one hand, it was in the interest of the Western powers and of the oil industry to create and support a social system based on the political and economic dominion of a small conservative elite, which would share with the West the concern to maintain the social *status quo* in their territory. To this end they supported traditional local authorities. The oil royalties paid to the monarchs by the oil companies constituted an increasingly important factor for the stability of the oligarchic systems.

On the other hand, the same influence of the Western powers and the Western economy in the Gulf were factors of destabilisation that undermined the existing social relations on which the traditional powers were based. The penetration of the Western market in Iran and Iraq undermined the traditional urban economy of the *bazaar*, and slowly disintegrated traditional relations in the rural areas. In all three of the major countries the critical dependence on oil for the stability of the social system made the system dependent on the expertise of foreign oil companies and fluctuations of the international markets. This increased dependence made the economies increasingly vulnerable at the same time as holding back the only possible defence against this condition: the development of a national bourgeoisie. The social unrest produced by these factors led initially to the menace to Western interests presented by oil nationalisation. However nationalisation did not alter the fundamental block to capitalist development presented by an economy based on rent. The fate of these regimes, founded on the internal circulation of the oil rent, was only to become even more the victims of the international markets; and when the boom was over it was clear they ultimately could no longer afford the price they had paid to buy off their own population.

Anti-Western sentiment has always been the natural expression of discontent in the Middle East, a direct product of a century of Western intervention in the region. In the past this led to the setting up of regimes explicitly opposed to Western, particularly US, interests and the Middle East Question haunted the foreign policy of US governments. Today Saudi Arabia, the US's number one ally in the Middle East, strains to contain an incendiary mix of the most virulently anti-Western sentiment of all. Yet in contrast to previous ideologies such as Pan-Arabism, Islamism offers no alternative future of national development for the Middle East. In the case of the disillusioned Saudi dissidents it represents a purely negative reaction to the tenacious oligarchy with its dependency on the US. In the case of the Afghani, Iraqi and Palestinian masses relegated to a sub-proletarian existence, it is nothing but the hope of the hopeless and the reversion to pre-capitalist modes of social reproduction. The *jihadis* as 'homeless militants' are (with the exception of the special case of Palestine) detached from any mass social movement and as such their spectacular actions can be seen as the deterioration of Islamism in its very moment of glory. If the US manages to pick off the terrorists with precision there will not be the generalised repression required to build universal solidarity among Muslims.

Yet the terrorism enacted in the name of Islam makes it difficult for the West to identify possible alliances with reformist, non threatening Muslims, a difficulty exacerbated by the absence of any convincing plan for the stable development of the Middle East on the part of the West. On the contrary it looks like a destructive reversion to a heavily policed pre-nationalised Middle East is on the cards, with Islamism on hand to pick up the pieces, but no-one to save the West from its immersion in the mess of a permanent crisis zone.



# A phenomenal anti-war movement?



The demonstration on February 15th 2002 against the threatened war on Iraq was the biggest protest march in British history. Almost unique in recent history, it was promoted beforehand by sections of the UK national media. The following day, the newspaper front pages were dominated by pictures of all the thousands in the streets, such images being treated as far more eloquent than the accompanying hacks' commentary.

What are we to make of this phenomenon? On the one hand, it seemed to be an expression of a movement with a lot of potential and energy - as witnessed in the many actions which disrupted daily life in various towns and cities around the world in the period leading up to and including the day war on Iraq was officially declared. On the other hand, the obvious involvement of sections of the ruling class in promoting the national demonstration, the traditional form of many of the protests, and their predominantly humanist (rather than class) rationale could lead us to conclude that all this energy was ultimately going up a blind alley.

One particular question that arises is that of why (so many) people got involved in the protest in comparison to the movements against the war in Iraq (1991), Kosovo and in Afghanistan. Given what happened (or rather what didn't happen) in response to these previous wars, the scale of the recent movement took many of us by surprise. Even in the USA, where the attacks of September 11th had seemed to close down the space for displays of opposition, there were demos across the country (and even by government scientists at a US base on the South Pole). In San Francisco, the city was virtually brought to a halt for two days when the war started; and in New York, despite a ban and a fairly heavy police attempts to enforce a ban, 200,000 took to the streets. As elsewhere, the UK national demonstrations, while of the plodding variety, were phenomenally large.

The recent protests not only had a political impact, they also appeared to affect the subjectivity of many of those who took part in them. Many for the first time became interested in 'politics', and demanded to know more and to understand the



wider world. This politicization seems to have been developing before the demonstrations themselves and was reflected in a general thirst for information.

This desire to grasp what was happening would appear to be one of a number of differences between reactions to this Gulf War and that in 1991. While in 1991, there were objections to the way the war was presented in the media - i.e. as akin to a video game - bourgeois journalists remained relatively uncritical of the justifications for the war itself. This time round, however, the size of the movement of opposition to the war, and the fact that the world bourgeoisie was not united behind it, encouraged a much more critical tone in much of the media. The lack of a decisive conclusion to the war, with no arsenal of 'weapons of mass destruction' (WMD) being found, and the quick victory turning into a bloody messy occupation, has led to a questioning of the motives behind and reasoning for the war. This questioning has continued, even if in part the government has managed to deal with the situation with an overload of tedious information around side issues like its argument with the BBC over its dossier on Iraq's WMD and the death of the weapons expert Dr David Kelly that resulted from it.

The contrast with reactions to the Kosovo war is starker. On that occasion, the 'humanitarian' gloss on the war served to wrong-foot the liberals in the peace movement as well as others who might have got involved, such as the direct activists. Even the traditional left could not decide whether they should defend Serbia against imperialist NATO or the oppressed Kosovars against 'fascist' Serbia. With the recent Gulf War, however, the pretext for war was so painfully thin that most liberals and leftists could easily reject it.<sup>1</sup>

The recent movement in the UK has a continuity with the movement against the bombing of Afghanistan in 2001, when there was again a network of local groups and a series of national demonstrations, which became smaller and more resigned over time as the activists eventually dropped out. In effect, the movement collapsed, having built up nothing like the momentum of the most recent movement.

This article seeks to address this question of how and why this anti-war movement was different. The movement was a worldwide phenomenon, and many of the features discussed here occurred in countries around the world. The present article is not a comprehensive overview but focuses simply on the organization and character of the movement in the UK, however, because that is where we, as the writers of this article, were involved. In particular, we describe how some of the dynamics of the movement as a whole were played out in one UK town, where most of us were involved. We conclude with some thoughts on the potential and limits of the movement.

### **Necessity and opportunity of resistance to the war**

As we discuss elsewhere in this issue, the attack on Iraq needs to be understood as part of an attempt by sections of the (US) bourgeoisie to use its military superiority pro-actively to reorder the strategically and economically vital area of the

Middle East in its interests and to demonstrate to the rest of the world that it could do this.

The struggle against the war therefore seemed necessary in order to defend the lives of the human beings - most of course fellow proletarians - who would lose out to the potentially unending series of pre-emptive conflicts that the USA was preparing for.<sup>2</sup>

However, for us, the key reason for opposition to the war was not some kind of liberal humanitarianism, but proletarian self-interest. A failure for this war to produce opposition would have a very negative impact on the subsequent development of the class struggle - in particular in the US and UK. The kind of attacks that took place on US longshoremen (dockers) during the war would only increase and be generalized in the absence of any kind of collective opposition to the war.

Yet the question of involvement has appeared as a dilemma for some of us. While opposition was necessary, the movement was clearly not going to express itself in class terms, and as such opportunities for effective action would be resisted. For example, no practical links were made with the UK fire-fighters' dispute. The best that could be hoped for, perhaps, was a more militant movement rather than a radical one. Thus, as has been the usual situation in response to capitalist war since 1990, some ultra-left and anarchist types have argued that we should not get involved in the movement, since such involvement would mean support for the left-wing (and even the liberal wing) of capital.<sup>3</sup> And some direct activists didn't want to get involved in what they saw as no more than a liberal- and Socialist Workers Party (SWP)-dominated pacifist popular front.

But this (ultra-left) critique of participation in the anti-war movement while essentially correct is also one-sided. Our instinctive reaction to arguments that we go to the march but not be 'on' the march is that they display a 'purism' whereby the political subject takes refusing to march behind the banners of the left as a positive step. For us, when it comes down to it, it makes little difference whether you go on the march or not. Like those who stand on the sidelines, we largely go on such demos out of a desire to get a feel of the mood of where people are at. Whether you do that by going on the march or by standing by the sides makes little difference. However, when it comes to local activity, we feel able to get involved in movements even if they are contradictory, since we may have an impact.

Moreover, for us, involvement in this movement was not only an imperative, but also an opportunity. The involvement of sections of the ruling class in the building-up of the national anti-war demonstrations was an indication not of an organized plot to divert proletarian energy, but rather a manifestation of disarray and a reduced ability to mobilize their forces on the part of the bourgeoisie, that has served to create a possible space for other needs to be expressed.

<sup>2</sup> See the National Security Strategy of the United States.

<sup>3</sup> The dilemma was concretized in the example of dithering and confusion around the samba-band led anti-capitalist bloc on one of the national demonstrations. It was unclear whether the bloc was meant to be a separate march or part of the main march, and what it was meant to achieve.

<sup>1</sup> An exception to this is Germany, where the strange phenomenon of German anti-Germanism led a part of the left to support the war because Israel supported it!



Sections of the ruling class were taken back by the scale of the opposition, and the willingness of so many people to be on the streets. This was most evident in the fact of the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, publicly acknowledging the size of the February demo even before it happened. Whereas the government normally ignore demonstrations unless there is a riot, this time the prime minister tried to get in a pre-emptive strike by anticipating the numbers and suggesting that it would still be a minority. Anti-war elements of the ruling class became further encouraged by the obvious strength of popular feeling. The result was that the government was split and on the verge of crisis, and reluctantly agreed to a parliamentary vote on the war. While such a procedure was of course a way of politically managing the potential crisis, it was a procedure forced upon the government in order to keep the movement within democratic bounds.

On the one hand this public disagreement merely reflects that function of democracy which is to contain and accommodate conflict and thereby legitimize capitalist relations in which 'everyone has a voice'. However, there was at least some potential that the 'democratic disagreements' over the war might escalate into something more.

### Content and form of the movement

One particular feature stands out, at least in the recent anti-war movement's immediate appearance. The anti-war movement was distinctly middle class<sup>4</sup> in character. Of course, the composition was in large part working class; but the hegemonic mood, values and tone were middle class. Even the large amount of muslims on the marches who in Britain are a group overwhelmingly at the bottom of the wage hierarchy, was largely organized through the mosques dominated by the middle class and petit bourgeoisie. Further, while those at the universities were struck by the level of activity around the war (and to a lesser extent this also occurred in 'white collar' workplaces like the local councils), in the post office - still a site of traditional working class militancy - one of our friends was not aware of even one of his work-mates going on the national demonstrations.

What explains the level of white collar and middle class involvement in the anti-war movement? An answer to this question lies perhaps in the nature of 'New Labour' Project, the thrust of which was to build an electoral coalition for New Labour around the 'middle classes' - not only professionals, the petit bourgeoisie etc., but also those who orient to and think of themselves as middle class, such as those who have mortgages and private pensions etc. They supported New Labour because it promised no tax rises and to continue to support (but also to 'modernize') the National Health Service; they were the kind of people who could not necessarily afford a private health plan, but wanted and expected more 'customer choice' in the provision of such services. While the New Labour Project has involved courting such people, many of them - particularly

those within jobs in and around the local and national state - have suffered from the failure of the New Labour Project to meet their expectations. The threat of restructuring and insecurity to white collar jobs (e.g. in education, local government and health), the various public sector targets, and the removal of occupational pensions have together served to create a climate of anxiety, uncertainty and unease amongst people who might have expected the government to look after their interests rather better. Thus many of those participating in the national demonstrations were students and ex-students, clerical staff, local government employees and so on: the would-be middle class who are in fact now the new working class. They did so because the war has served to unite 'everyone' against the government - to displace myriad individual problems onto a clear collective target: the government and its overall project.

Moving from the content to the form of the movement, the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) was undoubtedly the major organization, and the public face of the movement. It was the Coalition that called the national demonstrations. The StWC was dominated by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), but also included representatives from other leftist groups and Muslim organizations. Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) pacifists stepped back from the Coalition relatively early on. The SWP sought to steer the coalition towards building a 'the largest movement possible', which meant around the lowest common denominator politically, at the same time embracing Muslim organizations and the Free Palestine campaign (which dove-tailed anyway with SWP's anti-imperialism). In terms of numbers, it can be said to have succeeded.

StWC 'national meetings' were rallies rather than debates. Motions were token. The first meeting (due to take place before Xmas 2002) was cancelled anyway because of the fire-fighters' strike. But most people attending the meetings, although they complained, in effect went along with the stitch-ups; there was little in way of initiatives for alternatives.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that, without Coalition support - and indeed despite Coalition attempts to undermine them - protests at Fairford Airbase in Gloucestershire became a potential alternative focus for the protests shows that other organizational forces carried at least some weight. The Fairford protests remained a potential rather than an actual locus of national organization, however. The CND-types in the Bristol group who called the Fairford protests were overwhelmingly localist in outlook. For example, they supported the call for a demo at Menwith Hill, Yorkshire, on the same day as one of the Fairford protests! There was in other words no proper attempt to develop an alternative national focus - even though Fairford organizers were hostile to the StWC.

### Movement dynamics in one town

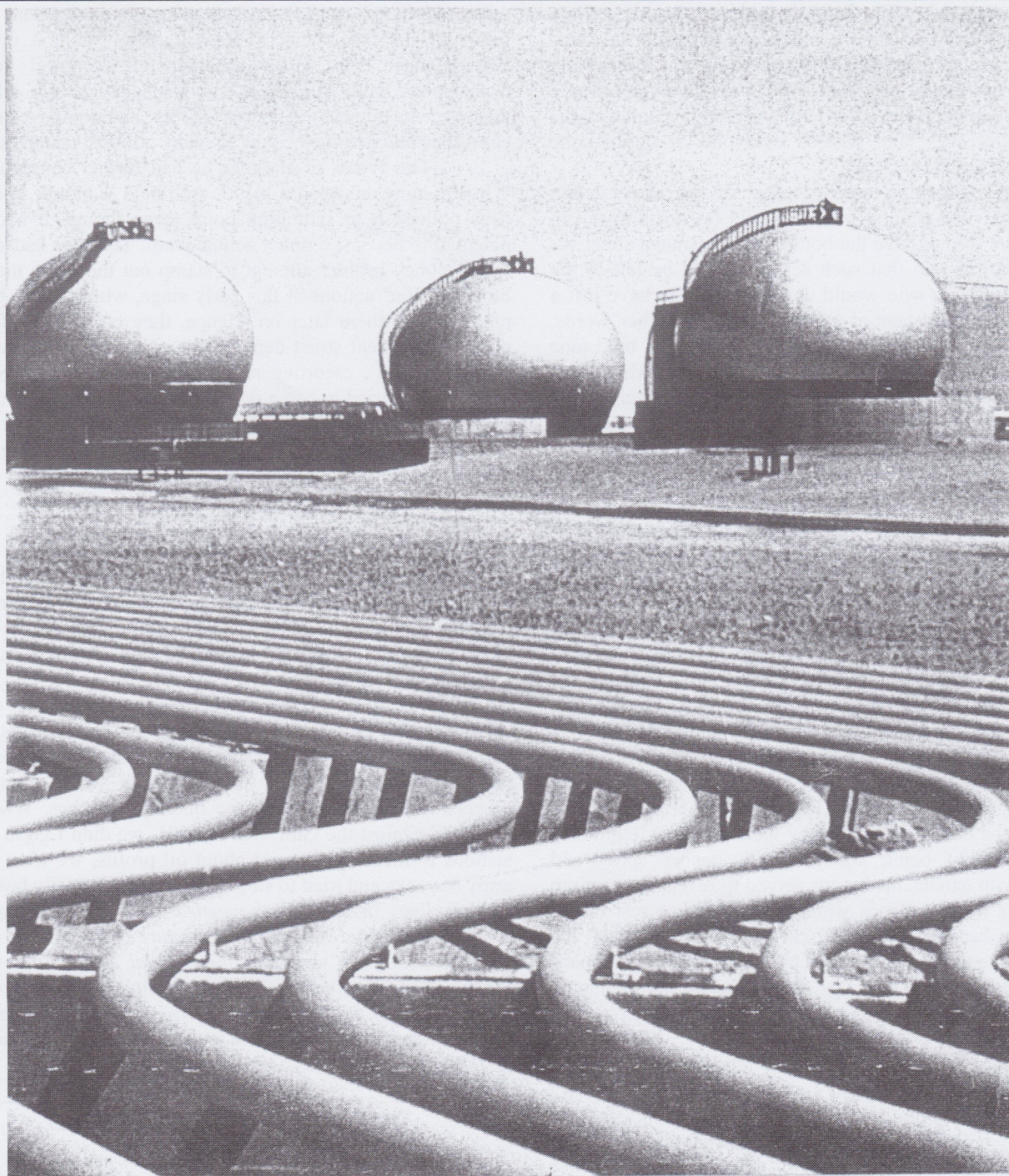
Some of the dynamics described above can be illustrated through the experience in one town, although it should be conceded that what happened here may not have been typical.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> While we reject the sociological use of the term 'middle class' as a category equivalent to that of working class, there is a moment of truth in its use as a short-hand for a particular relationship to capital and its concomitant subjectivity. See the discussion in our Review article 'From operaismo to "autonomist Marxism"' (pp. 30-31), *Aufheben* #11, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> One alternative was called in the name of *Schnews*, but didn't appear to get far.

<sup>6</sup> We don't know many details of what happened in other places, except London, which by its nature is untypical.





This account at least conveys some of the excitement and issues that confronted some of us, and we hope it is not too parochial.

In Brighton, in response to the war on Afghanistan, a number of different (relatively small) protest groups were formed, reflecting different political tendencies. The most radical anti-war group (comprising anarchists, communists etc.) became a constipated direct-action group, in large part because of internal political differences. By contrast, in response to the threat of war on Iraq, a larger more inclusive group emerged despite such differences - a group which was also more lively and effective than the earlier groups.

At first, there was the same split between the political factions. The pacifists and Trots organized meetings in the name of Sussex Action for Peace (SAfP), to which a small number of the direct-action types attended as delegates. But when, as in the case of the Afghan war, the separate direct action group itself petered out, the 'delegates' continued to attend SAfP, as we did. Within this umbrella group, factional identities were at first maintained: the Trots advocated marches; direct activists argued for small scale direct actions (and against marches etc.); and the pacifist liberals argued that the cops had to be told about any actions the group planned.

The national Coalition called for actions on Hallowe'en (October 31st 2002), but local groups decided what



form these might take. The Brighton group proposed a 'Stop the City, Stop the War' action, which was originally intended as a small group direct action. However, it subsequently became a mass tactic, endorsed by the Brighton group as a whole. In effect, the Hallowe'en action served to resolve all the factional differences, and pleased everyone. It defined the identity of the group as whole.

The expectation among many of the direct-action types was that 'the general public' would (a) not turn out in large numbers (b) not have the bottle for the planned street sit-down occupation, and that such actions would be left to the minority of activists who would therefore have to have just a token occupation for fear of getting nicked. In other words, militant mass action was not expected. However, a bold tone was set by a successful Critical Mass cycle protest which took place that afternoon. Critical Masses had been extinguished by the police in Brighton some years before. But a small group of cyclists setting off from Sussex University became a larger group which was then able to block off all of the southbound lanes of the trunk road into the town centre for more than an hour, despite the frantic and increasingly desperate efforts of the cops, who had not been consulted.

Come the evening of the main gathering, dozens of cop vans lined the streets. Despite the cops' show of strength there was still not enough of them to deal adequately with the protest, which numbered at least 500 people. Being unable to physically to surround the crowd which had moved onto one of the main road junctions, blocking traffic in four directions, the panicky cops resorted to the use of batons and pepper spray.

The failure of the cops to anticipate numbers and to successfully intimidate the crowd at this early stage only encouraged people to go further. Also, given that many people involved in the demo saw what they were doing as 'legitimate protest', suddenly being squirted with pepper spray and threatened with extendable batons served to reveal the partisan nature of the state the cops were defending. The rest of the evening then became a game of cat-and-mouse in which the crowd moved quickly and unpredictably to block various roads around the town, with the cops trying and mostly failing to keep up, and being further exposed as ineffective and buffoonish.

One of the interesting features about what happened was that the majority of people involved were not politically experienced; both young and middle aged, many were people for whom the movement against the war was the first time they had been on a demonstration. They had relatively little sense therefore how seriously the cops took a mass obstruction of the highway – they either didn't know the law or simply had that liberal sense of moral righteousness – and were therefore unprepared for the cops' reaction.

The sense of excitement and unpredictability – the feeling that anything might happen, that we had the initiative rather than the cops – marked the demo out as one of the best in Brighton for years. Many of us who were present were on a real high. Even at the end, when the cops finally managed to halt the progress of the crowd towards the shopping mall, and when they did a Section 60<sup>7</sup> around the rump, there was still a

sense of triumph, which gave us some encouragement in the future of the movement, at least locally. While it must be acknowledged that what happened felt so good because expectations were so low, it was also qualitatively different than recent protests in terms of its autonomy, collective coherence and involvement of so many political neophytes.

The events of Hallowe'en had further consequences. When a more traditional march was held a month later, the cops policed it to saturation point, even though it had little potential to become a direct action event. The cops had spent a lot of money in their attempt to stamp out the 'Stop the City, Stop the War' actions at this early stage, which led to budget problems for them later on. Hence, they could not afford to police subsequent street demonstrations except in the form of 'traffic control', escorting rather than trying to suppress the protest. They tried to ban a demonstration in January, but were relatively helpless to prevent a 'Valentine's Day' protest in the main shopping centre. This protest was another moving 'Stop the City' action, which became the template for actions on the day war broke out (March 22nd) and in the weeks subsequently.

The actions on the day the war broke out went on all day, led in the day-time by a school students march, and culminating with a partial attack on the town hall. Again there was at times a sense of power and unpredictability, as roads were blocked at will, with no agreed route. Versions of this protest became a weekly event.

The attack on the town hall, in which in fact only a small minority of the crowd took part, and the occupation of various petrol stations in the subsequent protests might perhaps have appeared radical but in fact hardly went beyond the tokenism and symbolism of the liberals' marches. When we protested against the Gulf War in 1991, we didn't go to petrol stations to make some point about oil profits, we went to the army barracks and tried to stop them doing their daily business! *The feeling that what happened was challenging and threatening lay not so much in the nature of the actions, which for the most part were nothing special, but rather in the number and variety of people brought into the movement and in the failure of the liberal peace movement to exercise control – as evidenced in the lack of the usual agreements with the cops on the routes and times of the demonstrations.*

### **The school-students phenomenon**

***'Stop the war!'***

***PS We want to wear trainers to school!'***

Graffiti sprayed by anti-war protesting kids

One of the features that appeared to differentiate the recent anti-war protest and mark it out as a movement with some potential to go beyond the usual protest was the independent involvement of school-students. It was unprecedented and unpredicted. While there were some schoolkid elements on the 1991 Gulf War demos, and while children have always been

thereby detain a crowd in a public place for as long as seen fit, and has been applied successfully (from the pigs' point of view) to such protests as Mayday 2002 in Oxford Street and Mayday 2001 in Trafalgar Square, when many people were angered but also too bored and tired by the end to react.

<sup>7</sup> Section 60 is a piece of 'Public Order' legislation (in fact introduced to deal with 'football hooligans') allowing police to surround and



involved in protests - both with adults and on their own - we have to go back as far as the 60s or 70s to find anything on remotely the same scale.

Joining a march of schoolkids, you found yourself not on the usual plodding (and energy-sapping) march but almost running down the street, a pace which the kids kept up for hours. While adult activists supported the kids' demos, they were in large part unnecessary for the actions to take place. The kids' demos therefore had their own feel and flavour.

They also showed little respect for adults at times. They didn't respect the cops, of course - they did not bother to tell them about their demonstrations in advance, in contravention of the Criminal Justice Act, and the cops were again left tail-ending the demonstrations.

This lack of respect applied to the adult protesters as well as to the cops. For example, on the first day of the war, when the Brighton kids' protest march arrived at the location where they were due to meet up with other protesters, some of the adults wanted the kids to stay and wait until more numbers turned up. But the kids simply ignored this and carried on sweeping through town. They didn't seem to have time for the experience of adults because they were confident in the effectiveness of their own actions.

There was therefore a refreshing lack of political socialization amongst the kids - they had not been brought up into and come to expect the usual boring way of doing demonstrations. So they brought some cheek and unpredictability to what they did. They also brought some radicality, as demonstrated by their willingness to get stuck in on occasions: kids hurled pencils etc. at the cops for example at the Trafalgar Square protests, and stoned an army recruitment office in Oxford.

On the one hand, many of the schoolchildren showed as much awareness of the issues as their adult counterparts (and were easily able to out-argue those arrogant adults who took them on yet who knew little of Middle-East history and politics); on the other hand, some of their actions went well beyond the conscious (liberal) rationales they gave for these actions. Some tried to disparage the kids' actions by suggesting that for many the protests were just an excuse to bunk off school; and some kids themselves defended the protests as a whole by saying that it was just a minority who used them to truant. These kinds of arguments falsely assume school to be a neutral institution. De facto the protests meant bunking off. It was also good that some kids also used the opportunity to extend their attack on the particular government policy of war to a practical critique of the general, everyday oppressive institution that is school. Likewise those school students who massed around Parliament Square on March 12th, ten days before war broke out, not only resisted the police but also underground train fares. As a mass - and their collectivity was impressive - they were ready to break the law.

For good or bad, relatively few organizational links were made between the school-students protests and other anti-war groups. While the school students were typically the kids of adult anti-war protesters, the kids' protests were not simply a function of adult protests but were organized autonomously. But all the adult-dominated organizations wanted to get involved with the kids' protests: all - including us - were excited about what was happening and wanted to get and be a part of the action.

A question that arises is why the school-students' movement developed how and when it did. For example, there was no equivalent kids' mobilization on the anti-capitalist demonstrations as on the anti-war demonstrations. Perhaps

'anti-capitalism' was too vague and diffuse a cause (international monetary organizations, multi-nationals, environmental destruction etc.), and the threat of war (death and destruction of the Iraqi people, dead babies etc.) seemed more concrete to them.

Perhaps the thing that made kids most aware of the issues around the war, and which made them feel confident to take collective action against it, was simply the wider anti-war movement itself. The anti-war movement went beyond the anti-capitalist movement in not only its size but also its inclusiveness. Kids could see their parents and others taking part in protest, and protest itself coming to be 'normalized', and therefore saw it as something that they could do.

### Potential and limits of the movement

A theme of this article has been the potential of the movement. But what was the nature of this potential, and why wasn't it realized? For example, one might ask why, given their size, the national demonstrations were not more confrontational. It might be pointed out for example, that London crime and arrest rates were shockingly low on the day of the historic February demo, for it was generally a remarkably well-behaved affair.<sup>8</sup>

All the attempts to channel the movement in a 'radical' or particular political direction were dwarfed and lost in the sheer size of the protests, particularly the February 15th demonstration.

On the historic February demo there were a number of initiatives you may not have noticed! There was for example a pacifist sit-down around Piccadilly, which had been planned and announced at the January national conference. A few people sat down and were moved by police, but their disruption was infinitesimal compared to the disruption the march was still making as it dispersed.

Around 'direct action' circles the somewhat unimaginative idea that had appeal was that of occupying the US Embassy. The closest this got to fulfillment was a several thousand strong breakaway from the main march (which actually felt insignificant given the size of the demonstration). This petered out as the cops blocked one route after another. Other groups approached the embassy but all to the same (non-)effect. Considering that the embassy was probably the most guarded site in London and that people had not come prepared to deal with the rubber let alone real bullets that would have been used, this idea was not really serious.

The London 'No War but the Class War' group that arose at the time of the Afghan war had spawned a more anti-theoretical direct action group, 'Disobedience', which organized a 'Hackney in the [Hyde] park' which was so small relative to the size of the demo it was difficult to find. Disobedience also produced an impressive print run of an agit-prop newspaper for the march, *Disobedience Against War*.<sup>9</sup> Something unifying the somewhat contradictory articles was the futility of the traditional 'march from A to B', and the necessity of something more radical, in the form of direct action.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps only just outdone by the mobilisation of the conservative Countryside Alliance who even went so far as to pick up all their own litter.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.disobedience.org.uk](http://www.disobedience.org.uk)



However, it was apparent that the march itself was actually very effective in that it brought London to a halt to a far greater extent than a few thousand direct activists might have been able to do. Despite the absence of radical intentions, the demonstration blocked and dominated the streets, disrupted the traffic and brought the city to a halt. In effect, then, the direct-action idea of going beyond the march with a sit-down or breakaway to disrupt the city was superseded by the unintended but inevitable impact of the march.

The fact that any impact of the movement was accidental seems to make the point that its excitement and potential lie not in any radicality it possessed - for there were no mass attacks on army recruiting offices, riots or suchlike - but rather in the sheer size of the movement. As in the Brighton experience, the importance of what happened was in terms of its inclusivity, for the movement brought in large numbers of people who were not normally politically active. As such, it was a genuinely social movement, in that it was not limited to the same old paper-sellers, 'revolutionaries', militants and concerned liberals who normally dominate such events numerically. This time, for a change, the politicians were outnumbered. On the other hand, it was not social in terms of being clearly informed by social/economic (i.e. class) interests. It was also not a social but a 'political' movement in that it overwhelmingly saw the issue as one of bad politics - a matter of changing a bad set of rulers and policies for a good set.

In successfully helping to build a mass movement, the Stop the War Coalition didn't need to impose artificially the left-liberal pacifism its steering committee members themselves espoused. Rather, the predominance of this ideology in the movement reflected the lowest common denominator and the feeling of the majority. Thus, due to the relative lack of influence this time round of the CND-type liberal pacifists, while there was not the same dominance of an 'organized' ideology as we have seen in the past, there was so much 'endogenous' ideology that the pacifists' work was done for them. The dominant slogan on the protests before the war was 'Not in my name', summing up perfectly the individualized, democratic and essentially moral argument against the war.<sup>10</sup>

This 'humanist' ideology might be understood as a reflection of the current state of the limits of the class struggle: class analysis was submerged because of the continued relative weakness of the working class. In the dominant pacifist ideology, the opposition was seen as one between war and the human, or, perhaps more precisely, between war and society.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> After Christmas, the dominant slogan became 'Stop the War'

<sup>11</sup> While previous anti-war movements have had this middle-class and hence 'classless', humanist, pacifist character (e.g., CND and the threat of the bomb to 'humanity' etc.), *Théorie Communiste* (in collaboration with *Alcuni fautori della comunizzazione*) suggest that it is in particular in its current restructuring that capitalism is experienced as a threat to 'society' (rather than to specific class interests, with which there is currently less identification than previously), and hence it is as 'society' that people react: 'The movement is pacifist. It is against the glaring necessity of the violence engrained in the restructuring of the capitalist relation and it is against this, now, in a way adequate to the acceleration of the restructuring that this war represents. [...] It is pacifist because unanimous, interclassist, consensual. The demonstrators know that the current war

In this middle class hegemony, the subject is the classless and individualized member of 'society'. In contrast to a class movement, the anti-war movement, rather than acting on the basis of material interests, expresses moral outrage. This is an expression of the 'separation between an "anti-war movement" dominated by ideals of peace and justice and the class movements that really end wars (the strikes, mutinies and revolutions that ended World War I and the insubordination, fraying and breakdown of the American military machine that ended the Vietnam War'.<sup>12</sup>

Yet we are faced with the anti-war movement as it exists, not as we might like it, just as we are faced with the class struggle as it exists not as we might like it to be. Indeed the movement dominated as it is by an organic middle class pacifism is one way that the class/value contradiction expresses itself at this time in the 'mode of being denied.' Just as the million who marched felt a need to respond to the barbarity of capitalist war so do we. And the way we did so was by involving ourselves in such a way as to attempt to push things further; in so doing one comes up against but can then best understand the limits of the movement.

One approach is to identify some points at which the movement might have been more effective and might have developed beyond its limits. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, and printed an article which identified a number of points at which 'we could have done better' in our attempts to prevent the war.<sup>13</sup> We argued then that the failure of radical tendencies to have more of an impact wasn't simply due to the dominance of the left-liberal leadership of the anti-war movement, but rather was more explicable in terms of a number of tactical errors. Such optimism was borne of the success of the anti-poll tax movement in which radical minorities had played a role. We had seen the nationwide occupation of town halls, the biggest London riot for 100 years, the abolition of poll tax and the demise of Thatcher. Also at that time the number of strikes began to rise again and hopes rose for a revival in class combativity following the nadir that had followed the defeat of the miners' strike in 1984-5.

The situation with this war was very different and our hopes lay elsewhere.

Perhaps the most obvious of the strategic points of potential development is that around the tension between the London marches and the actions around the airbase at Fairford, Gloucestershire. Fairford was the key European air base for most of the B52 aircraft which were the main bombers used in the war. But the combination of the localism of the Fairford organizers and the undermining actions of the Coalition served to keep the Fairford actions relatively small, while the London marches (which sometimes took place on the same day) were enormous (and passive).

is the expression of a general violence, but no call to the "class war" will get them to overcome this radical democratism which urges them to oppose the war as if it was only the expression of the will of a few politicians whose illegality and arrogance must be denounced.' ('A Fair Amount of Killing', Supplement to *Théorie Communiste* #18, p. 6).

<sup>12</sup> "Anti-capitalism" as ideology ...and as movement? Preface: From anti-'globalization' to opposing the war', p. 1, *Aufheben* #10, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Lessons from the struggle against the Gulf War' in *Aufheben* #1, 1992.



The point is that some people, as we did, thought that there was a possibility that Fairford could have been the central locus of a really effective anti-war movement, perhaps involving mass contingents from Europe. Before the war began, a number of protesters breached the airbase fence. Clearly, once the war had begun, the government - in the form of the army and police - would have gone to much greater lengths to prevent the possibility of mass occupation and sabotage of such a vital military base. They would have shot people if necessary. But even mass mobilizations of the army and cops would have raised the stakes considerably; mass conflict and antagonism would put the war effort under much greater threat than the millions on the streets in London.

Some people attempted to build the protests at Fairford in this way. While in hindsight such a prospect seems premised on a whole series of contingent conditions, at the same time it seemed hardly any more outlandish than the international anti-capitalist protests that took place in Europe only a few years ago, at Genoa, Prague, Gothenburg and so on.

Another form of action which might have made for an effective anti-war movement but which again failed to happen was in terms of workplace action against the war. In some countries, such as Italy, there was a much more significant involvement by workers than in Britain and some serious attempts to sabotage the war effort. But in the UK, the case of the two train-drivers in Scotland who refused to move supplies for the Ark Royal warship was a news story precisely because it was an exception. The movement against the war in Iraq in this country was essentially focused on extra-workplace activity - the best connections between workplace and anti-war movement organizations being the universities and town halls, as mentioned previously. Most proposed strikes and workouts failed. For most people, the connection between the workplace and the war wasn't an obvious one or as easy to achieve practically as going on a march; and so targeting work would have been difficult. And yet it would also have been more consequential than most of the marches and other actions.

The best opportunity of a link between the war and the workplace was the fire-fighters' strike. In the strike before the war began, the government admitted that, with so many troops busy covering for the fire-fighters, it would be impossible for them to go to war. The potential of the dispute was therefore enormous, yet the practical links between the movement and the fire-fighters were paltry compared with the symbolic shows of mutual support.

The leadership like other members of the 'awkward squad' of left wing union leaders, made anti-war noises at a political level, while promising not to undermine the war effort where it would have counted by striking during the war. The anti-war sentiments appeared to find little echo amongst the

rank and file. Our experience of the strike was that it was union and union activist led, and when the government showed itself determined to defeat it, no autonomous initiative met the inevitable 'sell out'.

### Towards a conclusion

The movement against the recent war on Iraq called into question the UK government's involvement in the war. A political crisis developed but it was just that - a crisis of politics. The Cabinet was on the edge of deciding against it; and we can also suggest that the strength of feeling as evidenced in the mass demonstrations may have delayed if not stopped the next war. But, while the movement shook sections of the ruling class, and arguably had the potential to provoke a political shift that would have prevented Britain's participation in the war, it did not do so, and the war went ahead.

A precondition for war is a certain amount of unity among the population to give the war legitimacy and to make it practically possible; and it would seem that the national disunity represented by the anti-war movement served to delay the war by several months. But the usual effect of war is to build national unity; and, indeed, once the war had begun, there was a falling away in the anti-war movement and increased support for the war. The movement, which had done so well to that point to confront the sense of fatalism about war that governments depend on, was ultimately unable to convince many participants that 'we could do something'. And once this feeling of inevitability emerged, the context and hence the arguments changed to reflect this.

While what happened was clearly not enough, it was also different and in some ways better than other recent mass mobilizations and anti-war movements. For us as people who take part in a lot of actions and demonstrations, the scale and energy gave us a sense of possibility. More than being simply something which we as people wishing to abolish capital do, many of our experiences in the anti-war movement were enjoyable and exciting. If we felt these things, it is possible that others did too. For all the liberal emotional outpouring, bourgeois support and elements of apparent spectacle, there were feelings of genuine power, hints of the susceptibility of the state to collective action, and a willingness to stay the course; although the movement fizzled out soon after the war began, it had kept up a high level of energy for months beforehand. In a country where we had not seen a really broad social movement since the poll tax the experience was gratifying. To the extent that these experiences stay in the collective memory, they can be brought to the next social movement.



# Communist Theory: Beyond the Ultra-Left

## A reply to TC



### Introduction

In the last issue, we published a presentation and critique of *Aufheben*'s decadence articles<sup>1</sup> by the French group *Théorie Communiste* (TC). To help make sense of it, we also outlined the importance of the ultra left<sup>2</sup> its development in France. Like many others, *Aufheben* has both acknowledged the influence of, and distanced itself from, the ultra-left. In general, however, *Aufheben* has made criticisms only in passing. Perhaps in the course of dealing with a particular struggle we have looked at what we see as the rigid and ideological point of view taken by 'partyist' but not only 'partyist' tendencies of the ultra-left. Such targets are perhaps all too easy to distinguish oneself from.

For TC, an attempt to critique and go beyond the theory of the ultra left has been a central focus. They have made a critique of the more theoretically dynamic tendencies which have sprung up (largely in France), trying to identify and question the theoretical assumptions behind their positions. The anglophone countries have not developed much of a distinct ultra left theory. TC's ideas overlap here more with some of the more interesting developments in

academic Marxism such as 'Open Marxism'<sup>3</sup> and Moshe Postone.<sup>4</sup> What is interesting is that many of these academics coming from a high theoretical engagement with Marx, when it comes to practical political conclusions of their work, move to a rejection of the traditional forms of leftism, generally accepted by their colleagues, towards the problematic of the ultra left.<sup>5</sup>

TC come at the issue the other way through an engagement with and dissatisfaction with some of the answers of the ultra left towards a radical engagement with

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term 'Open Marxism' is an attempt to identify and develop a non-dogmatic critical and dialectical tradition of Marxism. For examples see *Open Marxism* volumes I, II & III (Pluto Press), John Holloway's *Change the World Without taking Power* (Pluto Press) and also *Revolutionary Writing* (Autonomedia) the recent republishing of articles from the journal *Common Sense*.

<sup>4</sup> Moishe Postone's big argument is that what the problem of the traditional Marxism of the workers movement has been that it has been a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour, which is to say a theory of the realization of the proletariat when what is actually needed - and Marx provides - is a critique of labour in capitalism, that is a theory of the material abolition of the proletariat. See *Time Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press).

<sup>5</sup> A main example is the most practically oriented Open Marxist collection *What is to be Done?* (Avebury) which includes alongside the contributions of the academics the veteran council communist Cajo Brendel. Postone is less explicit about the political implications of his work but is being embraced by some of those interested in the situationists.

<sup>1</sup> See *Aufheben* issues 2-4.

<sup>2</sup> The attraction/repulsion of the label 'ultra left' has been a subject of many an *Aufheben* footnote. In this article we use 'ultra left', as TC do, descriptively and not pejoratively, in a broad sense to include the historic ultra-left of the German Dutch and Italian Left communists and more modern groups and individuals influenced by them.



the abstractions of Marxian theory. The title of this journal has always been an injunction to take theory forward, to go beyond existing theoretical positions; we think TC are clearly making an effort to do this, one that should be taken seriously. Moreover TC are an invitation to us to 'aufheben' our own positions.

'Programmism', 'rejection of a revolutionary essence of the proletariat', 'self-presupposition of capital', 'mutual involvement of capital and proletariat', 'cycles of struggle', 'first and second stage of real subsumption', 'restructuring', 'revolution not as the quantitative growth (transcroissance) of immediate struggles but as their produced overcoming'.<sup>6</sup> the reader of TC encounters a bewildering number of specialized terms some their own, others being used in their own specific way. For those not reading French the problem of the obscurity, that even most French readers find in TC, is compounded as the available English translations<sup>7</sup> largely have the character of dense summaries of their theoretical positions. Without being able to read the process of development and analysis that grounds these positions, they can come across as a series of questionable assertions. With TC the devil is surely in the detail and without this detail we are thus not going to come to a definitive judgement on their positions. This problem of language preventing us studying TC's writings in depth is a major obstacle. However in trying to make sense of the material we have access to - in part through reference to a common source in Marx - we will hopefully throw some light on the issues at stake.

What follows then is part of our unfinished process of attempting to engage with and understand TC - a sort of public auto-didacticism.

### Mea Culpa?

The essential points of TC's critique of the decadence articles can be summed up as follows: through a lack of the correct framework namely 'a conception of the contradiction of capital and proletariat as mutual involvement' the articles fail to escape a separation of capital(ism) and class struggle; communism and revolution are not historicized but seen to emerge from an essential invariant revolutionary essence of the proletariat - its affirmation rather than its negation. This is demonstrated in our use of the concept of alienation rather than exploitation. This leads to a formal treatment of the Russian Revolution; an inadequate attempt at a crisis theory; an incomplete critique of autonomist Marxism; and a false

dichotomy of state and capital. In sum we don't escape the objectivism/subjectivism problematic.

If TC think we are right to identify 'objectivism' as the key theoretical point behind the issues we deal with, they think we mistakingly grasp it as an ahistorical error rather than, as they do, something produced historically and necessarily by a phase of the class struggle. Let us first acknowledge that much of TC's critique hits home. Looking back at the decadence articles, one is all too aware of their weaknesses. If one was to write an article on the same subject now, one would produce something different. Thus we can accept TC's basic judgment that, while the articles deal with important issues, they fail to really make the breakthrough they wished for.

Further on we will treat of some of the specific criticisms of the articles, but what is most important is the way that TC identify the weaknesses in the article from their own theoretical perspective which would appear to grasp the issues more coherently. But what exactly is this theoretical perspective? Below we will briefly register some of the wider significance of TC's work and in particular their critique of the 'ultra left problematic'. We will then take up two issues on which we see disagreement. One is their apparent rejection of alienation in favour of exploitation. We will show that alienation is key to the whole of Marx's Critique of Political Economy (CPE), and is implied in the very concepts TC use. Two we will pose some questions concerning their periodisation of capitalism which we have problems with. We will then return to some specific points they made in their critique of the decadence articles.

### An ambitious theory

TC have recently produced a book summing up their theoretical positions and development - *Critical foundations for a theory of the revolution ; beyond the affirmation of the proletariat*.<sup>8</sup> At 722 pages and still only volume 1 in a four volume series on the Theory of Communism, the ambition of their project is shown in the following plan for the four volumes: Volume one (the one already published): critical foundations for a theory of the revolution; beyond the affirmation of the proletariat. Volume two : The contradiction between the proletariat and capital ; form and content of the contradiction; the cycles of struggles; the history of the contradiction. Volume three: The restructuring of capital; formation and historical significance of capital; crises - restructurings ; current relations between the classes. Volume four: New cycle of struggles - revolution - communism - olé!<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 'Transcroissance' or overgrowing is a term Trotsky used to describe the way he thought the bourgeois revolution in Russia or other less developed areas could grow into the proletarian revolution, an analysis that has not been borne out by experience. TC use it also to refer to the more general idea that the everyday class struggle, wage struggles defence of jobs etc. can simply generalize into revolutionary struggle. This conception is for them part and parcel of programmism.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/theocommunist/>

<sup>8</sup> *Fondements critiques d'une théorie de la révolution - au-delà de l'affirmation du prolétariat* - Roland Simon. Available from Editions Semonovera at <http://ca.geocities.com/senonevero/>

<sup>9</sup> For TC the Italian Left who "never reached a point or rupture as productive of interrogations and supersessions" as the German Dutch Left. They acknowledge the Italian Left for its critique of self-management and accept that as Camatte argues in his collection *Bordiga et la Passion du Communisme* there may in Bordiga be a



However for those like us only able to read English the most comprehensive statement of TC's positions available is probably the text from TC14,<sup>10</sup> which is a more detailed introduction to their ideas than the one we carried in the last *Aufheben*. 'Written for a group of "young Lyonnais" carrying out a "theoretical reflection on the German and Italian Lefts" it focuses on the historical significance of the German Dutch Left.<sup>11</sup> Unlike those seeking to claim in history a thin red line of historical antecedents for their own revolutionary authenticity, TC state: To align oneself with this 'heritage' does not mean repeating this or that invariant position of the KAPD or AAUD, or of theoreticians such as Gorter, Pannekoek or Rühle. Nor does it mean just taking the best from the ensemble of positions; the importance is the theoretical system, the problematic.' For TC the problematic of the German Dutch Left as the cutting edge of the German Revolution was the struggle against the "integration of the reproduction of the working class in capital's own cycle"; and of the revolution as the practical critique of the mediating forms - "syndicalism, mass party, united front, parliamentarism" - that had developed working class power within capital but were now seen to bind the class to capital. In the name of the class the ultra left attacked all the existing organisations of the class and called on workers to make the break. For TC this position (especially after the failure of the German revolution) can be summed up as criticising the existence of the class in the name of the revolutionary being or essence of the class.

TC's brutal honesty is to recognise that: "As real subsumption advanced (and this was the real counter-revolution in relation to the period at the beginning of the 20's) it appeared that the mediations of the existence of the class in the capitalist mode of production, far from being exterior to the 'being' of the class which must affirm itself against them, were nothing but this being in movement, in its necessary implication with the other pole of society, capital. The ultra-left arrived simultaneously, on one side at the critique of any relation between the existence of the class in the capitalist mode of production and communism, and from the other side at the affirmation of the equation of communism and the being of the class."

That is to say the position of the ultra left is a contradiction: the more it rejected and denied all forms of the

non-revolutionary existence of the class the harder it became to find and hold on to a revolutionary being of the class. A central idea of TC is that the entire workers movement both in what they call the period of formal domination of capital - from the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the first world war - and in what they call the first phase of real domination - which lasts up to the 70's - is characterised by 'programmatisation'. For TC the content and objective of the class struggle in this period was: "the increase in strength of the class within the capitalist mode of production and its affirmation as the class of productive labour, through the taking of power and the putting in place of a period of transition..." Despite their differences the formal programmes of socialist, anarchist and communist organisations express essentially the same underlying content: the class affirming itself as the positive pole of society carrying the seeds of the new (socialist, anarchist or communist) society. It is basic to TC's historical perspective that there is no thin red line of proper socialists or communists, who for contingent reasons somehow lost out to the 'state capitalist' leftists. Every political tendency in the workers' movement even the ultra left were still an expression of programmatisation because that was the way the capital-labour contradiction manifested in this period. The ultra left, and the left of social democracy from which it came, represented the attempt to hold on to the notion of an autonomous affirmation of the class against the mere development of the power of the class within capital which the rest of the workers' movement effectively stood for, but for TC, such a stance was bound to fail.

For TC the counter revolutionary role of the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Social Democrats in Germany lies the fact that "the autonomous affirmation of the proletariat confronted what it was in capital, what it had become; it confronted its own class power as a class of the capitalist mode of production.... labour can then propose itself for the position of the management of capital; it can become in such a way the acute form of the counter-revolution. The revolution as affirmation of the class confronts its own negation (the counter revolution is intrinsically linked to it) in that which is its essential determination." The autonomous assertion of labour cannot suppress the economy, so labour is faced with the task of managing it.

However, while the left (including, as was seen in Spain, most anarchists) continued unproblematically to affirm the working class, the ultra-left as TC say: "suggested to us: 'revolution and communism are not the affirmation of the class as it is in the capitalist mode of production,' but it did not itself extend the consequences of this to that which it considered to be the revolutionary nature of the proletariat, that which it always posed as separate from its 'existence'. The ultra-left functioned on that duality which would take the form: proletariat/working class.' We might say 'they appeal to the proletariat because the working class lets them down!'

Rejecting this romantic notion of the revolutionary essence of the proletariat, TC's way out of this problematic is

certain 'clandestine' discourse in contrast to the official discourse of the Italian Left. However for TC the Italian Left 'remained in a critique of mediations not in themselves, as mediations, but from a formal perspective. They knew the forms of these mediations only as forms and criticized them as such (mass party, united front, anti-fascism). They wanted the mediations (party, union, period of transition, workers state) of the empowerment of the class in the capitalist mode of production and its affirmation, without the expression of the existence of the class as class of this mode of production (cf. the debates of Bilan on syndicalism and even on the existence of the proletariat).."

<sup>10</sup> Available as a pamphlet simply called *Communist Theory*, it is on the web at <http://www.geocities.com/theocommunist/TC14English.html>



to historicize communism. TC reject (and they reproach our articles for remaining within) the conception of an unchanged communism that emerged as a possibility in 1917 to be eclipsed by the counter-revolution, to re-emerge again in '68, to be eclipsed again by the counter-revolution, to re-emerge again, when? For TC there are no eternal communist truths. What arose in 1917-23 was a specific historical revolution/communism marked by the idea of the liberation of work and an affirmation of the proletariat. It was also thus an impossible communism. In this analysis TC get away from the usual (non-)explanation for why proper revolutionary communist ideas/practice didn't win - the weight of the counter revolution - by asking why did the revolution and counter revolution take the form they did? TC refuse an explanation based on an exterior force or circumstances defeating the proletariat: the counter revolution was carried in the nature of the revolution. The ultra left pushed the understanding of communism as far as it could go within a cycle of struggle that could not escape the perspective of the affirmation of the proletariat.

### TC a theory of defeat and of coming revolution

Distinguishing themselves from some 'revolutionary thought' that emerged in the last wave of struggle, TC do not take the point of view that if 1917 was limited by the affirmation of work the struggles of the mass worker had completely escaped this by 68-73. If for both traditional leftists and ultra leftists everything has been seen through the prism of 1917, for some modern 'revolutionary' tendencies it is not 1917-23 that is 'the turning point of history where history refused to turn' but the period around 1968-77 that has taken on this significance.

Unlike a large part of the ultra left which saw '68 as displaying a wholly new and truly communist struggle, crucially for TC the struggles of '68-77, was not a new cycle but the end of the old one. Despite all the modern features refusal of work critique of everyday life etc for TC it was the last gasp of programmatism. TC see this even in the most advanced theoretical product of the period: the idea of the self-abolition of the proletariat expressed most prominently by the Situationists. For TC who themselves embraced the conception the early 70s, it is a paradox suggesting that the proletariat must draw from itself a hidden essence which is to destroy itself and does not escape the limits of the class struggle. But most importantly for TC, capital's response to these struggles means that this period of programmatism is over.

TC are a political and theoretical product of the wave of struggles around '68 that made many on both sides of the barricades think that revolution was imminently on the cards in advanced capitalist countries. As this prospect receded, many on our side at first understandably didn't want to see the depth of the defeat. One of the things that distinguished TC's analysis was that they started early on to recognize the profundity of the defeat that was occurring. Key to their analysis was that the restructuring had to be grasped as a fundamental alteration in the social relations.

The restructuring was for TC the overcoming of all the obstacles posed by working class identity to the reproduction of capital. For TC the change is radical enough to justify the identification of a new stage of capitalism the 'second stage of real subsumption'.

We are not convinced about the basis of TC's periodisation, but their introduction of new phase at this time has the merit of acknowledging the profundity of the alteration that was occurring in the 70s an alteration that many others were reluctant to deal with seeing only the crisis and austerity measures. When they say it was a defeat of workers identity, this is a profound transformation of the social sphere. Mostly the heralds of this change have been on the side of the bourgeoisie - one can think of the advocates of postmodernism, the heralds of the 'end of the working class' and so on - and the 'revolutionary' reaction is to deny or diminish what is happening. However such denial often involves a repression of doubt, which returns in the form of an underlying pessimism and depression. Compared to the earlier period the whole terrain on which struggle was conceived has changed massively, the bastions of working class militancy have been defeated, the sense of working class community disintegrated. TC may have been one of the few groups to face from an early stage what was happening; and while not diminishing the scale of the defeat they take a surprisingly positive perspective. Rather than focus on the subjective sense of defeat, felt acutely by 'revolutionaries', who saw better times and judge all recent movements by the standards of '68 and the last wave, they ask a more objective question - what was this defeat a defeat of - The answer - workers' identity.

In the decay of workers identity that has surely been witnessed since the seventies, leftists and most ultra leftists tend to see only a negative - that is why they are apt to deny it. For TC on the other hand workers' identity was a both a defence against the worst effects of capital and at the same time a foundation of capitalist reproduction. Thus while not denying the defeat TC see that capital in restructuring to defeat that cycle based on workers identity has prepared the basis of a new cycle of struggle where (and here we get TC's optimism) "the contradiction between the classes is henceforth situated at the level of their reproduction as classes. This level of the contradiction implies: the disappearance of all working class identity; that the existence of the proletariat as class is identical to its contradiction with capital; that the proletariat carries no project of social reorganization based on its nature. These are the characteristics of the new cycle of struggles."

For TC the revolution will not be when once again the working class affirms its identity but when "in the class struggle, class belonging becomes an external constraint imposed by capital."

It seems clear to us that there is merit to TC's arguments particularly the brutal identification of the contradiction at the heart of the the ultra left's problematic. And crucially of course, what TC are saying is not really about a small political area and its body of theory, but about



the development of capitalism/class struggle which that theory is one expression of. TC move us away from the complacent point of view that the 'communist' (ultra left) ideas will come into their own when the class struggle escalates by pointing to how those ideas are inadequate.

However while we can accept that to acknowledge the profundity of the change is perhaps good, we have at the same time numerous questions and doubts about it. Do they in not mourning the loss of workers identity miss the fact that perhaps the proletariat has to recognise itself and its situation to abolish itself? Can class struggle be reduced to its (self-) representation or is there perhaps a non-identical moment in existing workers struggles, as Holloway puts it 'the communion of struggle to be not working class.'<sup>12</sup> When they characterise the present period we would want to understand much more of the detail and in particular their concrete analysis of struggles. For example when TC say "restructuring has abolished all specificity, guarantees, "welfare", "Fordist compromise", we wonder if they aren't fallen into a danger in abstract theory of reifying tendencies into a achieved realities. They correctly describe the overall drift but doesn't there remain - especially in the advanced capitalist countries - a certain level of entrenchment especially in some sectors. Ironically considering TC is a French group it would seem to be in the anglo-american area that the changes TC talk about are more advanced. Surely the restructuring in Europe has been less successful and if it does have to go further for the contradiction to be posed at the level of the reproduction of classes then how far is far enough?

Another issue is that in the texts we have seen the definition of the character of the new form of struggles are very abstract. Perhaps one of the most important questions is: what concretely and positively defines this new cycle? Is it what they call 'radical democraticism' a perspective in which "there is only the promotion of democracy, of citizenship, the apology for the alternative. These practices and theories have no other horizon than that of capitalism." or as they suggest elsewhere is there something more radical at work? We know for example that TC make a great deal of the French unemployed movement of '98 however other reports of this struggle were less impressed.<sup>13</sup>

To return to the points raised in their critique of the decadence articles. As TC see it, the key theoretical issue underlying their more particular criticisms is the absence in our text of conceptions of the 'self-presupposition of capital' and of the 'mutual involvement between proletariat and capital'. This absence they say is typified by our preference for the conception of alienation to that of exploitation. Against this TC make an argument, that sounds inescapably Althusserian,<sup>14</sup> that "the question here is of determining the

concept of exploitation, to which *Aufheben* seems to prefer that of alienation, which upholds the exteriority between the 'alienated subject' and its 'essence' outside itself." While we can accept that a problem with the article may be that it is not sufficiently informed by the concept of mutual involvement, for us this cannot be due to our use of alienation. Rather, as we see it, it is in attention to alienation that the article comes closest to the concepts such as mutual involvement that TC make so much of! As we are sure TC are aware a concept of alienation is central to Marx's understanding of capitalism throughout his writings. In the *Grundrisse*:

it is clear, therefore, that the worker cannot become rich in this exchange, since, in exchange for his labour capacity as a fixed, available magnitude, he surrenders its creative power, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage. Rather, he necessarily impoverishes himself, as we shall see further on, because the creative power of his labour establishes itself as the power of capital, as an alien power confronting him. He divests himself [*entaüssert sich*] of labour as the force productive of wealth; capital appropriates it, as such. The separation between labour and property in the product of labour, between labour and wealth, is thus posited in this act of exchange itself. What appears paradoxical as result is already contained in the presupposition. Thus the productivity of his labour, his labour in general, in so far as it is not a capacity but a motion, real labour, comes to confront the worker as an alien power; capital, inversely, realizes itself through the appropriation of alien labour.... capital itself is essentially this displacement, this transposition, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, capital is this transubstantiation; the necessary process of positing its own powers as alien to the worker. (*Grundrisse* p 307-308)

Or in the 1861-63 Manuscripts:

labour thus appears to be active in the production process in such a way that it simultaneously rejects its realisation in objective conditions as an alien reality, and therefore posits itself as an insubstantial, merely necessitous labour capacity in face of this reality alienated from it, a reality not belonging to it but to others; that it posits its own reality not as a being-for-itself but as a mere being for something else, and hence also as a mere other-being or as the being of something else confronting it. (1861-63 Manuscripts CW 34 202)

<sup>12</sup> Change the World Without taking power p 144

<sup>13</sup> See articles in *Stop the Clock!* (See back page of this issue for details).

<sup>14</sup> Louis Althusser was a philosopher and member of the French Communist Party whose ideas made a big impact in the 60s and

70s. For him alienation was an idealist or anthropological concept of the 'immature' Marx of the 1844 *Manuscripts* replaced in the mature work by 'scientific' terms such as mode of production and exploitation.



Alienation for us must be grasped as the ontological inversion of subject and object at the heart of capitalist society. Within capitalist social relations, to quote Backhaus, "subject and object do not statically oppose each other, but rather are caught up in an 'ongoing process' of the inversion of subjectivity into objectivity, and vice versa", a process which overall represents 'the most general form of existence of society.'<sup>15</sup>

An important point is that this inversion is not a one-way process requiring a simple reversal to set right. The subjectivity of labour is as much a product of capitalist objectivity, as the objectivity of capitalism is a product of subjectivity. They constitute each other. For us it is exactly alienation - this dynamic of inversion - that forms the basis of the very concepts that TC like - self-presupposition of capital<sup>16</sup>, mutual involvement, subsumption of labour by capital, and even exploitation. For example the subsumption of labour by capital refers to the way that capital takes over the labour process. First its domination is formal in that it takes over the labour process as it finds it, that is as it has been developed by earlier modes of production. This formal subsumption gives way to real subsumption as capital is able to transform and revolutionize the labour process creating a specifically capitalist mode of production a form in which it never existed before.<sup>17</sup> All subsumption is an inversion, an inversion of subject and object summed up in the notion that 'Capital employs labour'.<sup>18</sup>

Already with formal subsumption the whole organisation of labour, the benefits of co-operation and the

division of labour are appropriated by and exist for capital, but what is going on is relatively transparent in this early stage, with real subsumption the process becomes mystified because 'The transposition of the social productivity of labour into the material attributes of capital is so firmly entrenched in people's minds that the advantages of machinery, the use of science, invention, etc. are necessarily conceived in this alienated form, so that all these things are deemed to be the attributes of capital' (p. 1058).

Alienation in the form of the separation of humans from each other and their world and in the sense of the subsumption of labour by capital which is the same as the 'transformation', 'transubstantiation', 'transposition', 'displacement', of labour to capital is at the centre of the concept of capital. That there is an exchange between past labour and living labour in which the former is dominant occurs only because of the self-presupposition of capital that is that social labour has been posited/produced by a previous and on-going process of separation in the contradictory and antagonistic form of capital and wage labour. The very character of the objective things and the sense of subjectivity as separate from things is itself produced through capitalist social relations. The social relations between people expressed as a movement of things become autonomous meanwhile the individual is produced as a bourgeois atomised individual. Capital then is not just objectivised labour, both 'objectivised labour' and subjective labour without objectivity are socially created forms into which the unity of the social individual is split and capital is value moving between them but always remaining capital. Capital separates human beings and then controls their connection, subordinated that connection to its purpose. Labour is capital, because in the form of alienated abstract labour it is the substance of capital. Thus the relationship between wage labour and capital is not an external opposition but an internal relation, and while capital appears to be the 'thing' side of the relation, such things are only capital by their relation to their opposite and thus that opposite wage labour is in a real sense capital's most fundamental form.

Thus the very concepts TC like in the mature critique of political economy are based in alienation. The presupposition but also the result of capitalist production is the separation between workers and the means of production that is between subjective living labour and objectified past labour. That separation is a state of alienation and it is maintained by an active process of alienation. This process of alienation has two main phases the sale<sup>19</sup> of labour power and the use of that labour power by capital. The two are interrelated. By the sale the worker has passed the use value of his labour power over to capital - right from the beginning the labour process the labour is incorporated into capital. Thus though in the actual production process the separation is superseded in a temporary unity, because the labour

<sup>15</sup> He continues "There is essentially nothing enigmatic in this thought" it is just the concretisation of the admirably lucid Marxian thesis that 'circumstances make men as much as men make the circumstances', and Kofler makes it quite plain that the 'concept of circumstance' is only truly comprehended by the concept of 'relations of production.' 'Backhaus [quoting Kofler] Between Philosophy and Science in Open Marxism Vol One p 60

<sup>16</sup> this term used by Marx in the Grundrisse pp 450-457 is close to the idea of the reproduction of capital - how it manages to reproduce its preconditions out of its own process.

<sup>17</sup> on p 1019 of the Results: In 'the formal subsumption of labour under capital...', 'capital subsumes the labour process as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over the existing labour process, developed by different and more archaic modes of production... This stands in striking contrast to the development of a specifically capitalist mode of production (large-scale industry, etc.); the latter not only transforms the situations of the various agents of production, it also revolutionizes their actual mode of labour and the real nature of the labour process as a whole.' [p 1021] CUT?

<sup>18</sup> What this phrase common to everyday consciousness means is that: 'it is not worker employs the conditions of labour it is the conditions of labour that employ the worker.' and Marx continues 'It is precisely through this that the latter become capital, and the commodity owner who possesses them becomes a capitalist vis-a-vis the worker. this independence naturally ceases in the actual labour process, but the total labour process is a process of capital, it is incorporated into capital. To the extent that the worker figures in the process as labour, he is himself a moment of capital. (CW 33 p 479).

<sup>19</sup> It should be remembered that one root of the term alienation is simply the term to describe what happens when you sell something.



belongs to - is subsumed by - capital from the beginning, the unity is a unity for capital and the separation is immediately there again when the process finishes, when what is needed for reproduction exists again as an objectivity belonging to capital. The self-presupposition of capital is thus the other-presupposition of labour: self-reproducing alienation. It seems to us quite possible that TC will agree with most of the above exposition. After all TC said of our statement that: 'For us, the market or law of value is not the essence of capital; its essence is rather the self-expansion of value: that is, of alienated labour,' that this 'could very well be theirs'. The acceptance that value = alienated labour, that alienated abstract labour is the substance of value, is for us key to a good reading of Marx and TC would appear at least at one level to agree. TC accept and use the term alienation. But the rationale for their criticism of us can be found in one of their articles: 'Let us not confuse "alienated labour" as it functions in the *Manuscripts* and the alienation of labour that we will find in the *Grundrisse* or in *Capital*. In the first case, alienated labour is the self-movement of the human essence as generic being; in the second, it is no longer a question of human essence, but of historically determined social relations, in which the worker is separated in part or in whole from the conditions of his labour, of his product and of his activity itself'.

TC's reaction to some of our use of the term alienation is based on them - correctly enough - detecting in the articles some of the formulations not of the *Grundrisse* or *Capital* but of the *1844 Manuscripts*. Something separating us and TC is then a very different appreciation of the *1844 Manuscripts*. TC indicate that they do not like the text, we - while accepting it has limitations - see in it the nub of Marx's Critique of Political Economy (CPE). We'd say that most of the concepts that TC like in the later Marx can be seen in embryo in the *1844 Manuscripts*.<sup>20</sup> TC on the other hand accept the Althusserian interpretation that the way Marx uses alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts* is essentially Feuerbachian.

For TC in the *1844 Manuscripts*:

The founding, primary movement is that of the self-alienation of man with regard to himself, everything else follows: the worker, alienated labour (which serves to "materialise" the self-alienation of Feuerbach), private property etc. The starting point is the self-alienation of man as a generic being; the self-movement of his essence, this defined as a genre, as an internal universality linking individuals

like natural process (which will be critiqued in the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach).

It seems to us TC (and Althusser) have got it wrong. Far then from Marx's use of species-being, as TC think, being merely a Feuerbachian concept of a generic being - 'an internal universality linking individuals like a natural process' - his presentation of the human essence in is precisely that it is nothing but activity: a living, evolving relation to nature created/constituted not primarily in consciousness (though human being is conscious being) but in and through social activity. Human historical activity in transforming nature, and creating specifically human sociability - transforms man. This activity has happened in the form of capital. The human essence for the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* it is not a generic category, it is not fixed - it becomes. The human essence is outside the individual, in the historically determined social relations that he is immersed in. Despite his praise of Feuerbach, Marx in the *Manuscripts* is already beyond him. Man makes himself in the form of estrangement. Man's 'social nature is realized only as its antithesis as estrangement.'<sup>21</sup>

A line (almost straight out of the *1844 Manuscripts* by the way<sup>22</sup>) that TC dislike is when we say 'revolution is the return of the subject to herself'. TC object that this 'doesn't really transcend the contradiction, or its terms, but it simply represents the return of the subject to itself (this smacks of teleology)'. Let us accept that there is a problem here. If the subject is the working class, then TC would be right to say that we remained 'within the perspective of the revolution as affirmation, as the triumph of the proletariat, and not as its abolition in the abolition of capital'. Marx always insisted that the working class are not the sole sufferers of alienation their importance lies rather in the way they experience the alienation ie not being confirmed in it.<sup>23</sup> But the other choice that the alienated subject that returns to itself is humanity would seem to imply a quasi-religious idea of a return to a mythical harmonious subject, some sort of a golden age.

So are we and Marx wrong to use this phrase? Should, as TC following Althusser argue, it be rejected as part or of a humanist problematic? We can accept that the subject here can not be the proletariat, nor a pre-existing humanity that has gone wandering and got lost. In the alienation the subject exists on both sides as proletariat and

<sup>21</sup> Notes on Mill in Early Writings p 269

<sup>22</sup> 'Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being — a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development.'

<sup>23</sup> The subject before class society and alienation was an undifferentiated unity with its object, capitalist alienation produces the subject and object, but these are not fixed but an on-going inversion communism brings them back together at a higher level giving the possibility of individuality beyond that experienced before class society.

<sup>20</sup> Something they come close to acknowledging the danger of: 'Our reading of the EPMs is determined by our knowledge of Marx's whole oeuvre to such a degree that we have difficulty in reading what is actually written'. Perhaps there is an extent to which we do the same but whereas they see only the break we see the connection. But we think there is more of a connection than break.



as capital for capital is in a real sense simply the alienated powers of humanity. Such powers are also part of human subjectivity but produced (and produced only this way) in to use a phrase TC like - "the mode of being denied".<sup>24</sup> The revolution is not the a-historical return of labour to itself but rather return of what has developed as alienated labour to those from whom it has been alienated. It is a uniting of the fragmented social individual. In a sense the subject who returns to itself is humanity not the proletariat, but this is a humanity that didn't exist before the alienation; it has come to be through alienation.

Thus the subject is not the proletariat nor a pre-existing humanity; the subject does not exist yet apart from as the fragmented social individual produced in capitalism. For us and for the Young Marx the notion of return it is about the (re-)union of humans with the social nature they have created historically and which did not exist before. This social nature has only ever existed in conditions of alienation the overcoming of alienation will be something that has never existed before. If alienation is the inversion a back and forth movement between subjectivity and objectivity, the subject/object split itself is a manifestation of alienation. The objectivity of capitalism is a peculiar objectivity, a second nature constructed by human activity in the form of alienation. The human being is spilt and fragmented. Alienation involves the production by human beings of their existence 'outside' of themselves but the objectivity produced - the objectivity of value - is a strange phenomenon acting back on the producers. The existence of the economy as a 'second law bound nature' separate from the individuals who create it, an 'objectivity of value' based on what Marx in *Capital* called deranged (*verruchte*) forms. There is a coming to be of humanity through alienation. Capital is the essential species powers - 'the relentless productive powers of social labour' - developing as an end in themselves (Production for Production's sake) their reappropriation which would involve not a democratic management of this system of production but a new form of human being. The humanity from which we are alienated is a humanity which is not yet. Is this a teleology? - perhaps but if so it is one we can live with.

Contrary to all this, TC reject the idea they find in the *Manuscripts* of the 'necessity of alienation' in the 'becoming of man in alienation', saying 'The necessity of alienation is to produce the conditions of its suppression' - we are in the realm of teleology - with which Marx settles his account still in ambiguous manner in *The German Ideology*. But even twenty years later in the 'Missing Sixth Chapter' which TC like Marx is still saying the same thing:

at the level of material production, of the life process in the realm of the social — for that is what the process of production is — we find the same situation that we find in religion at the ideological level, namely the inversion of subject into object

and vice versa. Viewed historically this inversion is the indispensable transition without which wealth as such, i.e. the relentless productive powers of social labour, which alone can form the material basis of a free human society, could not possibly be created at the expense of the majority. This antagonistic stage cannot be avoided, any more than it is possible for man to avoid a stage when his spiritual energies are given a religious definition, as powers independent of himself. (*Capital* p 990)

Indeed one could say that the whole idea of programatism implies a period when alienation and the existence of the economy seemed to impose itself as a necessity on the proletariat.

In contradistinction to the analysis of alienation that we have made, TC put their emphasis on exploitation, and we include their definition of exploitation below as an Appendix. Now we accept that TC's understanding of exploitation does go further than the understanding of alienation that one can get from the *1844 Manuscripts*. However we'd say that TC's emphasis on exploitation is only possible because they make an unusual understanding of exploitation closer in our view to what we understand as alienation. In their seven points of the definition they bring together self-presupposition, mutual involvement and the subsumption of labour by capital, in particular the last - as they say 'exploitation is subsumption'.

Thus exploitation is grasped by TC as the contradictory relation of capital and labour: a total relation of classes. In effect it seems TC are using the 'Missing Sixth Chapter' to open up the theory of surplus value just as fetishism can be used to open up the theory of value. But just as fetishism refers us back to alienation so does subsumption. In the special definition of exploitation that TC develop, we have essentially a more concrete and historical sense of alienation that Marx has developed in his later works but it is still alienation. Capital exploits not through personal direct domination but on the basis of alienation and the impersonal power of things - an economic alienation backed by the alienated force of the state. The point is not to use the 1844 concept of alienation as an alternative to the later CPE but to grasp the later CPE as a more concrete development of the dynamic of alienation.

TC might say that we are getting quite metaphysical, what with an idea of a subject that returns to itself never having existed before, and they prefer exploitation as the key concept because of its 'toughness' and precision. But for us it is alienation that is the more specific concept to capitalism. Exploitation that is, the extraction of surplus labour, defines in general any class society, while it is the extraction of surplus labour in the form of surplus value - that is exploitation on the basis of alienation - that is specific to capitalism. Exploitation as valorisation is labour becoming alien, and a theory of valorisation and of capitalism cannot but be based on alienation and fetishism. Alienation deals with aspects of

<sup>24</sup> A phrase we adopt from Gunn and the *Common Sense* bods.



capital that the category of exploitation has to be really stretched to encompass.

Indeed to make exploitation do the work they ask of it, TC also go against the grain of the way the category has been used. That the 'worker is exploited' has actually been stressed by the traditional left for whom the working class has been seen to exist independently from capitalism with no mutual involvement and the problem is 'capitalism exploits it.' It therefore needs to be 'freed from exploitation' in a socialist (work) regime.

It probably boils down to a matter of different political contexts. TC's use of Althusser on alienation is part a reaction to certain ultra left or pro-situ scenes where the discourse of alienation and/or the 'critique of work' works in ideological way. Alienation can be seen as a psychological state of or as the separation from some a human essence with an inherent tendency towards communism. In particular the way that the ultra left has developed in France since '68 has had two main theoretical directions one the minor one -TC's - the other is more humanist in a sense of a focus on the contrast of capital and the human community<sup>25</sup>. TC see the latter approach as a theoretical dead end. Whereas for us the political context makes the issue almost the opposite! Ultra leftism particularly the sophisticated ultra leftism and its turn to a humanistic problematic that TC are responding to is hardly an issue for us. The arguments have far more for us involved the need to stress alienation against an objectivist leftism that has stressed exploitation! The emphasis on exploitation 'the theory of surplus value', has to a large extent been a feature of more objectivist scientific Marxists, for example of those who believe there is such a thing as Marxist economics. To focus on alienation has seemed key to us because the idea of an unalienated, existence reaches for the radicality of what communism means against the prevalent political conception of socialism. The critique of alienation is simultaneously a critique of politics, and of all the regimes that have been held up as transitional to communism.

<sup>25</sup> According to TC the dominant tendency of the ultra left tries to answer the question 'How can a class, acting strictly as a class, abolish capitalism?' by: taking up the contribution of the Lefts without the managementist aspect (*Le Mouvement Communiste* journal and book ), or in abandoning it altogether, to be left with nothing but a catalogue of 'revolutionary positions' ('Bail à Céder') of which the 'revolutionaries' were the sole guarantors (*Le Mouvement Communiste*.4). This route was pursued later by the journals *La Banquise* and *La Guerre Sociale*, but with more and more support for a humanist conception of the proletariat, notably present in *La Brise-Glace* and *Mordicus*: the liberation of human activity from work or from class, capital as oppression, the proletariat as the poor. Finally, no longer able to envisage the contradiction between the proletariat and capital as productive of communism, the vision on the whole was that of an opposition between communist and capitalist tendencies. This finished by understanding the movement of society as an opposition between the true human community and the false - democracy (hence the revisionist deviation, cf. TC 13).

On the question of alienation then, we do not think there is much chance of us becoming Althusserians. But to be fair TC are not Althusserians, they find something useful in Althusser, Balibar etc. TC make the point that they have only started reading Althusser seriously in the last few years i.e. long after they had already developed all their main positions. We can agree that we must take useful ideas from where we find them. Probably in France a look at what academic thought had to offer would find currents influenced by Althusser inescapable, whereas we have tended to find the "Hegelian Marxist" reaction against Althusserianism more useful. However such appropriation should be a careful one and thus we would be interested in knowing what TC think is good or important about Althusser/Balibar - what do they accept and what do they reject? What are the texts or concepts that they think are key?

### Questioning TC's periodisation of capitalism

Another main issue we have doubts about is TC's periodisation of capitalism. TC seem to put a lot of weight on the periodisation of capitalism in terms of a dichotomy of formal and real subsumption to explain the changes in capitalism. For TC there is a stage of formal subsumption up to around 1900 or the First World War, a first phase of real subsumption of labour until the seventies and a second stage of real subsumption since then. The workers' movement based on the assertion of workers' identity arises in the period of formal subsumption, becomes the institutionalisation of the worker as collective labourer in the first period of real subsumption, and then, with the second phase of real subsumption, suffers an irreversible decline.

TC are by no means the only ones to use these categories for a periodisation of capitalism. It is perhaps best known in the way it has been taken up by the autonomist marxists in terms of the thesis of the social factory associated with Tronti and taken up enthusiastically by Negri. However we think that the first to develop the idea was Jacques Camatte in *Invariance*<sup>26</sup> and this led to its adoption by large part of the French ultra left in the early seventies. We ourselves in the decadence articles adopted the periodisation at one point. This periodisation has a lot to recommend it. Unlike the decline problematic which our original articles critiqued, the periodisation on the basis of formal and real subsumption catches the way the world has become more and more capitalist. Real subsumption describes the commodification and penetration by capital into nearly all areas of social life. It brings out the extent to which the domination of capital has become more intense.

But as we have seen the diverse ways that people try and use this periodisation it occurs to us that perhaps its very appeal is linked with a vagueness, a lack of theoretical

<sup>26</sup> Published in English as *Capital and Community: The results of the immediate process of Production and the economic work of Marx* (Unpopular Books).



precision - it can mean all things to all people.<sup>27</sup> For example while for most it has been a way to drop the idea of decline, others combine it with such a theory while for some it becomes part of a break from Marx (Camatte) others have tried to follow closely what Marx wrote (Communism or Civilisation) While using this periodisation against the schematicism of ascendancy and declining capitalism was undoubtedly useful we wonder if there is not a new danger of a sterile schematicism with the stages based on the two forms of subsumption? Thus we have serious questions about this periodisation and wish to understand if TC's use of it has the problems we detect in other advocates.

TC's periodisation of the twentieth century makes a lot of sense in terms of when they see the breaks happening (they correspond with the revolutionary waves we are familiar with) and the content they put in these phases is also quite recognisable. However TC seem to intend more by these stages than just a description of the key elements of these periods, the stages are meant to be explanatory, i.e. that we moved into a phase of real subsumption explains the changes and that we moved into a second phase explains the subsequent changes. Thus it would seem to us that TC need to explain how changes in the labour process around 1900 marked its real subsumption, how this is connected to the general class struggle and workers movement and how the varied features they identify with these stages are explained by the changes in the labour process. What in other words justifies calling these periods that come after these strong waves of struggle around 1917 and 1968, phases of the real subsumption of labour? Perhaps a lot of this would be cleared up by translation of more of their texts but once again we are stuck with what we have got.

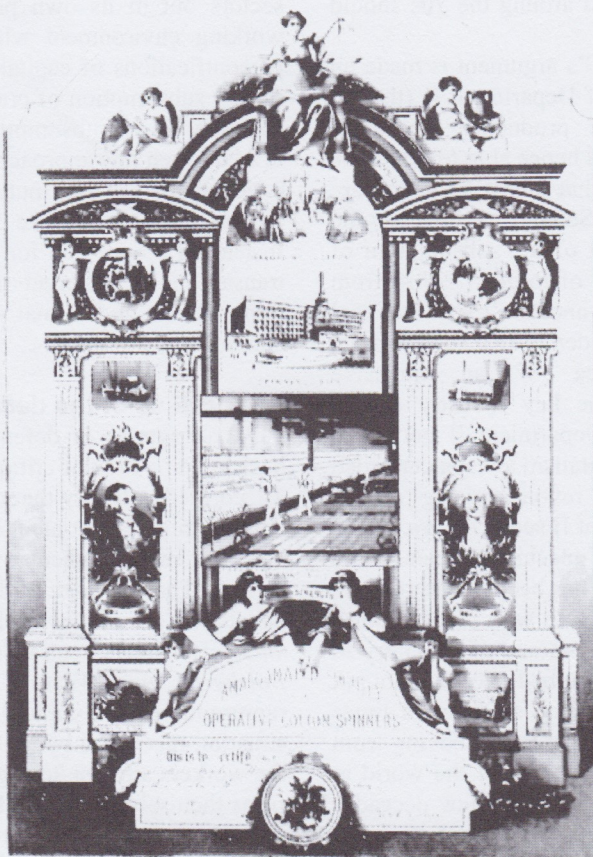
One of the problems with this is the extension of the category from the factory to society is the real subsumption of society something separate to the real subsumption of labour or is it that changes in society follow when real subsumption in the factory has become dominant? If real

subsumption is a feature only of the twentieth century then what exactly is the real subsumption of labour? Are we dealing with a suggestive idea of a rough general tendency or a quite firm periodisation that a lot is to rely on? If the issue is one of relative surplus value becoming dominant then how do we define dominance? Why the dates? How in general does the change in the immediate process of production relate to circulation? How does it relate to the relation between the political and the economic?

For Marx formal and real subsumption of labour were clearly stages of the emergence of the capitalist mode of production not a way of periodising its maturity.<sup>32</sup> As we already mentioned formal subsumption is when a pre-capitalist labour process is taken over by capital, real subsumption is when that labour process becomes transformed. (The classic example of the formal subsumption of labour was the putting out system where the traditional craft peasants performed in their homes started to be done for a capitalist middleman who provided them with the raw materials and took away their product.) With formal subsumption exploitation can only take the form of absolute surplus value that is the extension of the absolute

length of the working day beyond the time workers would previously have worked and must still work to produce the value of their means of subsistence. With real subsumption capital is able to also gain relative surplus value that is to increased productivity thus allowing the worker to reproduce the value of the wage - means of subsistence - in less time leaving relatively more time for the production of surplus value.

However what this means is that even the earliest form of capitalist production described by Marx - co-operation - has elements of real subsumption, as did the next phase - manufacture - and certainly the stage of large-scale industry is based of real subsumption.<sup>28</sup> Of course we can see a good argument for proper real subsumption only being a



<sup>27</sup> The main text for an understanding of Marx's understanding of formal and real subsumption is the 1861-63 manuscripts (Collected Works 30 and 33-34).

<sup>28</sup> This is indicated by the fact that all these systems of production are placed by Marx in part 4 of Capital "The production of Relative surplus value."



feature of the use of machinery, thus dating it to the introduction of large scale industry in the last third of the eighteenth century. We can also see an argument that would make the class struggle over the working day as decisive for the development of a stage of real subsumption, thus dating it to the mid nineteenth century on the basis that the class struggle imposed limits to the working day, forcing capital to rely more and more on relative surplus value as the extension of absolute surplus value is blocked. We can't however quite see on what basis the introduction of real subsumption should occur around World War I nor why the undoubted changes that occurred around the 70s should be a new phase of real subsumption.

If as we understand that TC's argument is made on the basis of the real subsumption of Department II (that is, that part of capitalist production producing means of subsistence for the working class and hence able to affect the value of the wage) and they admit that this is here they are following work of the Regulation School.<sup>29</sup> (However the Regulation School used this criteria of the subsumption of Department II as a basis of a theory of fordism a shift from extensive to intensive accumulation and don't speak of real subsumption of labour.) Does TC's idea of real subsumption correspond with Aglietta's idea of an intensive accumulation? Anyway wasn't the key industry of the beginning of the CMP, cotton, a Department II good and even more fundamentally hasn't capitalism always depended on the subsumption and massive revolutionising of the production of the ultimate Department II sector - agriculture. At the very least the introduction of machinery science and machinery - thus real subsumption - has been a feature since the 1850s? Finally isn't there issues with being country specific - for example if one uses the amount of peasantry as a sign that agriculture is not fully subsumed does that not put countries all moving to real subsumption at different times and indeed it may be coherent to see capital as moving from formal to real domination in different areas of the world at different times for example might not the last few decades have shown a whole swath of countries from South Korea to Indonesia China and India moving from formal to real subsumption? But would they be in the first or second stage? We get no suggestion of this from the TC that we have read in fact we get a hint of a eurocentrism or even Franco-centrism to the analysis.

We think it is possible to conceive of the shift in a more flexible way. TC would no doubt accept the real subsumption of labour presupposes the formal subsumption of labour - just as the production of relative surplus value presupposes the production of absolute surplus value. Following this one could argue that after the historical transition to the real subsumption of labour to capital that occurred with the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, there still remains a tension between the two. Even in industries that have long been 'really subsumed', capital will always take the existing immediate process of production developed by the previous accumulation of

capital and its struggle with the working class as a given - as a barrier to further accumulation. At the same time workers will attempt to defend the skills and working practices. Thus, for example, Taylorism was introduced to break the power over the production process of the skilled industrial worker. But these skills and practices were not pre-capitalist - most of them did not exist hundred years before - but were industrial skills and practices developed out of several decades of struggle and compromise. Another example might be the computer industry which on the one hand is instrumental in the revolutionizing and hence real subsumption of other sectors but in its own production of software produces a working environment where the relationship between the personifications of capital and those of labour resemble the formal subsumption of craft skills. If one is going to use the formal and real subsumption of labour in a way beyond that in Marx then this approach would seem a more subtle way of conceptualising the mutual involvement of capital and labour in terms of these categories than that offered by TC. Instead of a once and for all transition we could have many transients at different times and places and the abstract terms of real and formal would have to be given a concrete content.

### The critique of the decadence articles

With no agenda of defending the articles lets briefly look back at some of their critique of particular parts of the article. TC correctly identify that despite our correct observation that 'Communism is a content - the abolition of wage labour - not a form,' our treatment of the Russian revolution remains formal. That is, one could say it within the terms of the debate of the sixties and seventies - of self-management versus Bolshevik centralism of which Maurice Brinton's *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control* - is perhaps a classic representative. TC cut to the heart of this debate by quoting a situation recounted by Voline where the opposition between the workers attempt 'to organize their transactions with other firms themselves' and the Bolshevik attempt to centralize the process was clearly demonstrated but TC then ask the question, 'but is it possible to imagine an exchange which would not take a form alienated from the exchangers connected by it?' (*Aufheben* 11, p 50).

TC's suggestion here is that workers self management and Bolshevik control were two answers to the same wrong question a question posed by the limits of the revolution, its inability to pose communism as communisation. For them the Bolshevik counter-revolution needs to be 'related to the content of the revolution', a content related to the nature of the contradiction between capital and proletariat at this time. The counter-revolution was carried in the revolution, the Bolsheviks were simply the force that carried it out.

TC here seem to express a determinism with regards the fate of the Russian Revolution. For them the failure of the Russian revolution was determined but not by the level of the productive forces considered in a technical sense, that is as something exterior to the class, but rather by the character of the capital-labour relation at this time, which led to class

<sup>29</sup> Michel Aglietta "A Theory of Capitalist regulation



struggle taking the form of differing conceptions of the affirmation of the proletariat none of which by nature could put capital into question. Thus TC answer's to why the Russian Revolution, developed the way it did is in terms of their big concept of Programmatism. In terms of the treatment of the Russian Revolution TC's approach certainly puts it into perspective and offers an escape from the '1917centrism' of much of the left/ultra-left.

On another point TC correctly observe that when we criticised *Radical Chains* account of the relation of the wage and welfare we fell into a model of 'on the one hand value on the other state activities' to which they say 'being constrained forms part of the definition of value' that is that "political' forms of dealing with the class 'are attributes of value, of wages and exploitation'. Looking back we would stand by the overall thesis against *Radical Chains* that one specific relation between economic forces and political forces - The New Poor Law of the Nineteenth century- cannot be taken as the essential one from which others represent a decline of the law of value. However the way we made our point does fall into fetishised separations of the political and economic. To talk of value in relation to its fundamental commodity of labour power being constrained by political forces is wrong. The state is not separate from the wage relation - it forms part of its very existence. Our analysis here failed to take on board that the separation of the economic and the political in capitalism is a bifurcation of the capital relation thus that value is not merely a category of 'economics' of the 'market' but is equally one of the 'politics' of state spending and action, economics and politics are two complementary aspects of the one value - that is class - relation. We should have taken more seriously our own reading of the Marxist work on the state capital relation.

On the crisis TC focus in on the account we give of the 'productive forces - social relations' contradiction in a footnote to the third part of the article. Looking back at this one remembers that among all the critiques of other theories of the crisis there was a wish to suggest positively the direction in which a more fruitful understanding of crisis would lie. TC say our formulation does not escape a dualism as 'On one side the crisis, on the other the class struggle; a meeting of divergent interests shaping capital's path, but the development of capital and the crisis cannot be understood in themselves as class struggle.' We are quite happy to admit that it needs more work and that as it stands it does not escape an objectivist problematic.

A similar point comes out in how TC judge our account of autonomist Marxism. TC harshly but probably accurately say that despite making some good points in our critique of the class struggle theory of the crisis, that we have ended 'with a sort of position of mitigation: you must deobjectify the contradiction between capital and the proletariat, but keep aside a little objectivity, above all for periods of counter-revolution' (p. 51). We feel TC are right here - our critique of autonomist Marxism and our suggestion of an alternative theory of crisis has not gone to the root because really the root of the critique of the autonomist

Marxism would be a theory which escapes the objectivism/anti-objectivism position a theory that our articles called for but did not produce. TC we think may show the way to such a theory:

The radical critique of objectivism, the theoretical destruction of economy as such (to reconstruct the economic relation as a class relation), is absolutely necessary for else we would be stuck with subjectivism, that is to say, in imagining ourselves to be giving the role of an active subject to the proletariat we would be placing it in an objective situation in relation to which it must have a strategy, of which it must 'become conscious'. Here lies all the importance of the ideological figure of the militant, the sole true carrier of revolutionary subjectivity faced with the objectivism of the 'situation' which he himself has posed, and which permits him to ask (not understanding the meaning of 'crisis of the relation of exploitation'): "But then what is there to do?", though the question is not at all what can we do but "where are we in our theoretical and practical struggles, where is the production of the revolutionary crisis at the moment?", because there is never any lag of consciousness. There is no such thing as an 'objectively' revolutionary situation, or rather, every 'objective' situation is by definition not revolutionary, because objectivity is capital reproducing itself as economy. In the revolutionary explosion the production of 'theory', that is to say the consciousness in action of the revolution, will appear as a massive disobjectification of the relation between proletariat and capital.

## Conclusion

One might say that a lot of what TC say has been said by others, but it has not been integrated in the same way. For example, the idea of a periodisation of capitalism based on formal and real subsumption and the critique of self-management is shared by much of the (ultra) left. However TC seem to be alone in taking these ideas towards a radical critique of the ultra left's whole conception of the relation of class struggle and communism. On the other hand TC's recognition of the recent decline in working class identity and questioning of the mythology of the inherently revolutionary nature of the class struggle in the past has similarities with Camatte and of course with numerous bourgeois thinkers. However TC do this without rejecting the key role of class in the overthrow of capitalist mode of production.

A question that may occur to people is: what practical use is TC? What conclusions do they draw from their abstract theory? Well, TC have interesting things to say about struggles they are involved in.<sup>30</sup> Our impression is that the sophistication of their theory allows TC's involvement in struggles to be very practical, because it allows them to neither measure struggles by an impossible standard nor go in for the ritual denunciations of unions and the left that many on the ultra left seem to.

<sup>30</sup> Eg 'Diary of a Striker' on the movement of '95.



For us we felt compelled to give TC attention because they produced a challenging critique of our decadence articles, and did so on the basis of their own theoretical perspective that tantalisingly offers the possibility of going further than we were able to do with those articles. Our experience with TC is that their texts require multiple readings and some considerable effort but most of it does make some sort of sense after that. The question is whether TC deliver the promise of a theory that genuinely overcomes the dichotomy of structure and struggle, objectivism and subjectism, determinism and voluntarism or whether it perhaps reproduces some of the weaknesses of the theories of the ultra left, Althusser, the Regulation Approach, it appropriates from.

We are driven to theoretical reflection, as we are driven to participate in the class struggle. We are not driven by something outside ourselves but by the recognition that ultimately nothing is outside ourselves. We have come across TC and they pose some serious questions to which we don't have the answers; so we must continue to ask the questions.

## Appendix

(From TC14:) 'This contradiction is exploitation

1. It defines the existing classes in a strict relation of reciprocal implication.
2. As accumulation it immediately poses the contradiction between classes as an historical process.
3. It defines its terms not as separate poles with determined natures being modified through history, acting in relation to an exterior movement of accumulation posed as the condition of their action, but makes the relation between the terms and its movement the 'essence' of its terms.
4. It is, as the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, the process of the historical signification of the capitalist mode of production; it qualitatively defines the process of accumulation of capital as de-essentialisation of work, as 'contradiction in process'; it defines the accumulation of capital as its obituary (cf. Marx, *Grundrisse* MEWp. 601).
5. It means that the proletariat is never confirmed in its relationship with capital: exploitation is subsumption. The contradiction between proletariat and capital is the very means by which work exists socially - valorisation. Defined by exploitation, the proletariat is in contradiction with the socially necessary existence of its work as capital, that is to say value become autonomous and only remaining so in valorising itself: the fall of the rate of profit is a contradiction between the classes. Exploitation as contradiction de-objectifies the movement of capital.
6. The proletariat is constantly in contradiction with its own definition as class: \*It encounters the necessity of its own reproduction as an object opposed to itself, in the form of capital. \*It never finds its confirmation in the reproduction of the social relation of which it is nevertheless a necessary pole. \*It is in contradiction not with an automatic movement of reproduction of the capitalist mode of production but with another class, capital is necessarily the capitalist class. For the proletariat its own existence as class passes by a mediation: the antagonistic class.
7. Not permitting the definition of classes outside their reciprocal implication and the historical flow of their contradiction (the contradiction is precisely this historical flow), exploitation nonetheless specifies the place of each of the classes in this

implication. It is always the proletariat that is subsumed under capital, and at the end of each cycle capital must reproduce the confrontation with labour; exploitation is effectively realised with the transformation, never accomplished, of surplus value into additional capital (capital as process of its own self-presupposition). With exploitation as contradiction between the classes we understand their particularisation as particularisation of the community, and therefore as being simultaneously their reciprocal implication. This then signifies: the impossibility of the affirmation of the proletariat, the contradiction between the proletariat and capital as history, the critique of all theories of the revolutionary nature of the proletariat as a definitive essence buried or masked by the reproduction of the totality (the self-presupposition of capital). We have historicized the contradiction, and therefore revolution and communism and not just their circumstances. Revolution and communism are produced historically through the cycles of struggle that mark time in the march of the unfolding contradiction.'

From 'Pour An Finire Avec La Critique Du Travail' TC 17.

'The critique of work can only have an object and can only justify itself only if it constructs its object outside ['auterieuement'] the social relation, and so it becomes purely speculative; inversely if it is the historically determined social relations that it makes a critique of, it enters into contradiction with its own initial moment of abstract formulation of its object. The critique of would like work as a social relation outside ['auterieuement'] from all social relation. The critique of work is a dead end. Firstly it constructs an object of analysis which is work in itself; secondly, it wants to deduce from the analysis of this activity - which as it has been presented is a speculative abstraction - the contradictory social relations in which human beings evolve. This, either by a contradictory development internal to this activity, or by an irreducible property of alienation, that, by nature, this activity possesses. The particular modulations of this general impasse end up all with the transformation of the critique of capitalist society and of its fundamental social relation, exploitation, into a critique of work, a critique of activity. The subject we are dealing with is therefore a bit paradoxical. It is to define work to say that the critique of work is not an object of critical theory. This for two reasons: the "critique of work" is a dead end, the; the abolition of work does not happen via the "critique of work"..... It is then as a moment of the critique of these ideologies, that it is necessary to critique work as the object of this critique and because this notion of work plays an active practical role in the shaping of struggles in the most radical currents of 'radical democratism'. The limit of all critiques of work is that they places activity, as the essence of critique, what should be understood as social relations. In this, this critique always refers to the Feuerbachian concept of 'alienated labour' developed in the 'EPMs of 1844'. Based on the religious model, the basis of the concept of "alienated labour" is that the object produced by the worker appears as the objectification of the essence of man which becomes alien to him. There is a concept of "alienated labour" only if we suppose a human essence like a generic being that loses and finds itself, that lost itself only to find itself again. As Marx says in his own short preface to the manuscripts, Marx finds in Feurbach's philosophy the positive basis to pursue the critique of political economy to which he searches to find a "basis in reason". This basis is man as generic being on the one hand, and on the other, alienation the paradigm of which is religious alienation. The concept of alienated labour is built from these fundamentals. "We have considered the act of alienation of practical human activity under two aspects; firstly the relation of the worker to the product of labour...Secondly the relation of work to the act of production...As such we have taken from the two precedents a third determination



of alienated labour. (here follows the definition of "generic being"). Through alienated labour, man doesn't only encounter his relation to the object and the act of production as alien ['etrangere'] forces which are hostile to him. He encounters also the relation in which other men find themselves in regard to their product and their activity and the relationship which he has with these other men." The categories of political economy, and first of all those of private property, can therefore be deduced from alienated labour. But these categories which "express" alienated labour "in its reality", are themselves, as formulations of the social relation, only the manifestation of the auto-alienation of man which is the first principle, founding "in reason" the categories of political economy. Our reading of the EPMs is determined by our knowledge of Marx's whole oeuvre to such a degree that we have difficulty in reading what is actually written: alienated labour is the basis and principle of all relations between individuals as they exist in society. The founding, primary movement is that of the self-alienation of man with regard to himself, everything else follows: the worker, alienated labour (which serves to "materialise" the self-alienation of Feurbach), private property etc. The starting point is the self-alienation of man as a generic being; the self-movement of his essence, this defined as a genre, as an internal universality linking individuals like natural process (which will be critiqued in the 6th thesis on Feuerbach). From which, two results: the impossibility to make of history a reality, and connected with this, - the teleological question par excellence which runs throughout the text without Marx offering an answer: "How does man come to alienate his labour, to produce it as something external to him. How does alienation establish itself in the development of humanity. Because when we speak of private property, we believe we are dealing with something external to man, although when we talk of labour we are immediately dealing with man himself. This new formulation of the question already implies its answer." Answer which must be so obvious that Marx never formulates it when he asks the question. Marx goes beyond what he calls "the strange discourse of political economy", "which dissimulated alienation in the essence of labour by refusing to consider the direct relation between the worker (labour) and production." The direct relation between the worker and production which is for him the loss of his product, it's derealisation ['derealisation'], becomes "alienated labour" that is the essential relation of labour". Alienation is inserted as the essence of labour, but as a relation of labour to the human essence, or better as the movement of the human essence as labour: "labour is the becoming of man in alienation". The "solution" to the "necessity of alienation" is in the last chapter of the manuscripts - that we will have to search for it in the form of a "realist" understanding of the negation of the Hegelian negation. The necessity of alienation is to produce the conditions of its suppression - we are in the realm of teleology - with which Marx settles his account still in ambiguous manner in "The German Ideology". The critique of labour in the EPMs is only the critique of the auto-alienation of the human essence. All critique of labour functions in this way, in that it starts from the alienation of a subject to deduct the "social frame" of this alienation, even if they don't share the same "theoretical manner" as the EPMs. Take out the human essence as genre, as this abstract universality inherent to each individual and linking them together, you have the 6th thesis on Feuerbach, and you have removed the legitimacy of this critique of labour as foundation to all critiques of historical forms of particular social contradictions. Let us not confuse "alienated labour" as it functions in the Manuscripts and the alienation of labour that we will find in the *Grundrisse*... or in "*Capital*". In the first case, alienated labour is the self-movement of the human

essence as generic being; in the second, it is no longer a question of human essence, but of historically determined social relations, in which the worker is separated in part or in whole from the conditions of his labour, of his product and of his activity itself, (petit-bourgeois production, because of the exchange of products and thus their productions as commodities, is equally alienation of labour). If we are no longer searching for the cause of alienation, and more precisely of exploitation, in activity itself as labour, (a search which cannot go beyond a negative anthropology becoming a positive anthropology), it isn't to say that the critique of social relations does not take in a critique of labour and that we consider labour as an activity which is eternal. We do not have an a-priori definition of labour, we will outline it here, partly as a critique of the "critique of labour", understood as a limit in the class struggle in general as it manifests itself under the real subsumption of labour to capital (in the struggles of the unemployed and precarious workers it appeared both as its most radical expression and as its limit); and partly as abolition and overcoming of the capitalist mode of production. It is only from the basis of this double critique that we should understand what is work and its abolition, without that we inevitably fall back into a perspective where the contradictory social relations of capitalism, the class struggle, the abolition of the capitalist system, appear as developments and successive forms of Labour realising itself. What is important for an understanding of exploitation, its critique and abolition, is that it is the social relations which make human activity labour - what is important therefore is the abolition of this social relation (the separation with the community), and not the abolition of labour itself, a thing which has no intrinsic dynamic to itself at all. With the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and therefore of wage-labour which is its fundamental social relation, it appears that the production of relations between individuals is no longer subjected to, mediated by, the activity of man as an objective being, which (mediation between individual activity and social activity), is by that the master and object of the relation. Labour is human activity as objective being in the separation of individual activity and social activity, and by that becomes the substance of its social value. ...With the abolition of capitalism, it is man himself, the free development of his individuality, which becomes the goal, the means, the object of this objective activity.'

#### Errata

In the first part of this article in the previous issue, the sentence on page 45 should have read: 'Of course, the positions of the ultra-left emerged out of the class struggle, but such positions were only *more or less* right when they were made - they are approximations, an expression of 'as revolutionaries, best saw it' - and thus something more needs to be done than just agree with them and proselytize.' (Emphasis added) NOT 'as the best revolutionaries saw it'.

On p. 52 the words '[of decadence theory]' after 'aside' in the sentence 'This is the conclusion of the affected critical brushing aside realized in the text, but here one is at the beginning of the essential problem:' should not have been inserted.



# 'We have ways of making you talk!'

## Review Article

*Hotlines: Call Centre, Inquiry, Communism* (Duisburg: Kolinko, 2002)

### Introduction

In recent years there has been a revival of interest within some political circles to the left of Leninism both in the concept and practice of workers' inquiry and in 'autonomist' politics in general<sup>1</sup>. At a time when class struggle is often characterised as being at a low ebb, some have turned to categories of class composition in an attempt to understand 'where things are at, and where they might be headed' in terms of capitalist social relations. For some within these circles, workers' inquiry has afforded an answer to the much debated question 'what can we do, what is the role for revolutionaries in times of low class mobilization?'

One such group is the German Ruhr based collective Kolinko, who have made workers' inquiry the basis for their practice; their book, *Hotlines - Call Centre, Inquiry, Communism*, details such a project over three years in call centres in the region. The book consists of the group's understanding and application of worker's inquiry; an analysis of call centres and restructuring in the sectors which they service, such as banking, commerce, telecommunications and services; the new organisation of the work process; subjective accounts of everyday experience and individual work refusal in call centres; a critique of forms of collective struggle in call centres; a proposal for revolutionary 'nuclei' to undertake inquiries and exchange on regional and international basis; and appendices of questionnaires, leaflets used in 'interventions'.

Kolinko have faced criticism from two opposing angles as a result of their promotion of workers' inquiry as a political project: on the one hand they have been accused of engaging in 'radical sociology'; on the other they have been reproached for 'Leninist militancy'; they deny both charges. This review article will address some of the issues thrown up by this tension between sociology and interventionism in relation to Kolinko's project, and assess whether their attempt to steer a course between the two is successful.

Kolinko's call centre inquiry raises a number of problems as to the nature of class struggle, the role (if any) for 'revolutionary' groups in these struggles and what might constitute a 'revolutionary practice', which we will look at in this review article. We will also ask the question of whether workers' inquiry itself is an appropriate tool for 'revolutionary intervention' – or indeed whether the idea of 'revolutionary intervention' makes sense.

### Background to worker's inquiry

'No investigation, no right to speak!'<sup>2</sup> Mao's injunction to learn from the working class and also to agitate was taken up by Maoist groups around the world, who sent moles into the factories in many Western countries in the 60s and 70s. Often they would find themselves in competition in these workplaces with other Leninist militants who had also gone into the factories with the idea of leading the workers. Kolinko seek to distance themselves from these practices, and in making use of workers' inquiry, take as a reference point the work along these lines of several earlier revolutionary currents: it is worth comparing the work of the Johnson-Forest tendency in US, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France and *Quaderni Rossi* and the workerists in Italy to Kolinko's inquiry project<sup>3</sup>, in order to understand the relation of these groups' activity to the working class struggles of the times, and to trace the theoretical development of categories of class composition and 'workers' autonomy' or 'self-activity' which underlie Kolinko's project.

#### *Into the factories*

Workers' inquiry, or 'militant research' as it has been called by the German group Wildcat, is most readily associated with the Italian workerist tradition; yet in many ways two groups, the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the US and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France were precursors of operaismo.

These groups dedicated much of their energy in the 1950s to exploring the 'authentic proletarian experience' hitherto passed over by party dogma and developed theories of working-class autonomy against the conception of the passive role of the class in the various currents of both 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' Marxism. Both groups had broken with Trotskyism over its critical defence of the Soviet Union as a 'degenerated workers' state' and now rejected the politics of subordinating class struggles in the West to the interests of the USSR. With the distraction of the Soviet question out of the way, they now chose to investigate the actual situation in the factories, and focus on the 'autonomous behaviour' of workers.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation from 'Oppose Book Worship' in *Selected Readings* (Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1971)

<sup>3</sup> Indeed in tracing the history of workers' inquiry it would be possible to go back as far as Marx's 1880 questionnaire with a hundred of questions in a French workers' newspaper, *La Revue Socialiste*, dealing with everything from lavatories, soap, wine strikes and unions to 'the general, intellectual, and moral conditions of life of the working men and women in your trade.' See <http://www.ex.ac.uk/Projects/meia/Archive/1880-AWI/>

<sup>1</sup> The publication of Steve Wright's book *Storming Heaven - Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press 2002), reviewed in *Aufheben* #11, has contributed much to this renewed interest.



### *The Johnson-Forest Tendency*

The Johnson-Forest Tendency<sup>4</sup>, born in 1941, considered that the USSR had become 'state capitalist'. In 1946 they published *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, which was both a 'theory of a stage in world capitalism' and a break with 'orthodox' Marxism and its preoccupation with the question of the formal ownership of the means of production: their analysis was founded instead on the relationship between concrete working conditions and the 'self-activity and -organization' of the workers in the United States in the 30s and 40s.

The tendency was born against a background of intense class struggle in the United States. The new forms of production – with factories organized along fordist and taylorist lines, typified by the assembly lines in the automobile plants, had engendered a high level of class struggles as workers in the new plants developed the 'sit down' strikes. Migration, predominantly of blacks from the rural South and tenant farmers compelled to leave their land due to the drought in the 'dust-bowl' to the rapidly industrializing North, helped create a new, increasingly semi- and unskilled proletariat in a process of permanent recomposition, neglected by the traditional craft unions of the American Federation of Labour (AFL).

1936 had seen the first 'sit-down' strike at GM plant in Flint, with 140,000 workers taking part. In 1937 the whole company was stopped because of the occupation of the plants in Flint and Cleveland. It seemed that the workers had found the Achilles heel of the new industrial production-chain and were able to exercise their power. 1937 saw more than 447 'sit-downs' with more than 300,000 workers. It was in these struggles that the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) as a modern industrial union came to the fore, organizing women, blacks and unskilled workers.<sup>5</sup>

Struggles continued through the 40s and 50s; there were many instances of wildcat strikes in the automobile industry in the 50s, for example, where work at the assembly line was attacked in a direct way and a strike in one or two plants had the power to stop the whole production of the company. The Johnson-Forest Tendency attempted to recognize this workers' 'self-activity' and to relate to the class struggle through a number of methods. Firstly, through *Correspondence*, a newspaper reflecting 'the forms that the class uses in expressing itself'. A 1953 editorial of *Correspondence* admonishes: 'we must watch with an eagle eye every change or indication of the things (the relations in his living culture) that these changes reflect'. *Correspondence* was a real forum of workers' discussions. The Johnson-Forest Tendency stressed the importance of making newspapers 'by workers not for workers'. Secondly, through interviews – this was the method of 'record and recognize'. The Johnson-Forest Tendency emphasized the importance of the circulation of ideas and experiences, and saw this as being the role of newspapers and interviews. Thirdly through going into the plants themselves 'to develop organic ties with the working class', 'to learn not to teach'. Whilst these Tendency members did not aspire to be a formal

leadership for the workers, it is clear that they would experiment with interventions and attempt to prompt struggles: according to Martin Glaberman<sup>6</sup> 'our concept was not that we weren't going to be activists or we weren't going to be leaders, but it didn't have to be formal leadership'.<sup>7</sup>

The Tendency's project, then, clearly went beyond sociology: on discussions with other workers which led to wildcat strikes, Glaberman states: 'we felt proud that we could play a role in getting a massive undertaking like that underway.. this kind of experience makes you feel that you are invaluable to the working class, that the workers wouldn't have done this by themselves. You have an independent power.' On the relationship between revolutionary group and the working class Glaberman advises that 'there has to be a way of communication to each other, to society as a whole and to the working class. In both directions. Not giving lessons, but also learning'.<sup>8</sup> There is a tension here, which resurfaces in Kolinko's project, between privileging workers' self-activity and the pretension of the revolutionary group that it can speak to the working class as a whole, and perhaps make decisive interventions to alter the course of struggles.

Perhaps the most influential product of The Johnson-Forest Tendency's work in focusing on relations in the sphere of production was *The American Worker* (1947)<sup>9</sup>, a pamphlet in which an industrial worker gives a descriptive account of the working conditions, the division of labour and the subjective experiences of semi-skilled workers in mass production and their (often contradictory) attitudes to work and its organisation, strikes, slow-downs and the union. This account is supplemented by a theoretical analysis by one of the group's members, Ria Stone, who described the reasons for seeking out and publishing the experience of a young worker: 'Today it is the American working class which provides the foundation for an analysis of the economic transition from capitalism to socialism, or the concrete demonstration of the new society developing within the old'. As Martin Glaberman puts it in the introduction to the pamphlet, they sought 'the experience of workers to provide the basis for the continuing expansion and development of theory, that is, of the continuing analysis of capitalist society and the socialist revolution being created within it'.

This was at odds with the traditional Leninist assumption that workers were only capable of developing a 'trade union consciousness'. Glaberman talks of the dialectical relationship between the theoretical analysis and the practical experience of workers, albeit separated in the persons of the intellectual and the industrial worker: 'The fusion of worker and intellectual into one totality..had not been achieved by any Marxist group. But at the same time that *The American Worker* was evidence of that separation, it was also evidence of the attempt to overcome that separation, if only in the formal placing of two articles side by side.'

<sup>4</sup> The Johnson-Forest Tendency was named after the pseudonyms of C.L.R. James (aka Johnson) and Raya Dunayevskaya (aka Forest)

<sup>5</sup> See 'State of the unions: recent US labour struggles in perspective' in *Aufheben* #7 (autumn 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Johnson-Forest Tendency militant who worked for many years in car factories.

<sup>7</sup> From 'Workers have to deal with their own reality and that transforms them' by Martin Glaberman <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~rgibson/workersreality.htm>

<sup>8</sup> See 'Revolutionary Optimist – An Interview With Martin Glaberman' at [ca.geocities.com/red\\_black\\_ca/glaberman.htm](http://ca.geocities.com/red_black_ca/glaberman.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Reprinted by Bewick Editions, Detroit 1972



As we shall see later, Kolinko attempt to overcome this separation through their inquiry or 'self-inquiry'.

Later incarnations of the tendency, namely the Correspondence Publishing Committee and Facing Reality, continued to publish accounts and analyses of the conditions in large-scale industry in the U.S., in which the beginnings of an exploration of the relationship between the (re-)organization of the production process and forms of workers' organization can be seen. These publications were always intended to be read by workers, and not academics.

In *'Be His Payment High Or Low': The American Working Class of the Sixties*<sup>10</sup>, Martin Glaberman describes the changing nature of struggle in response to modernisation of the production process, automation and mechanisation in sixties America: 'The workers are engaged today in a process of reorganisation, corresponding to the capitalist reorganisation of production, in a search for new forms of organisation that are adequate for their needs.' (p13). Glaberman sees in the waves of wildcat strikes and sabotage a searching for new forms of struggle outside the unions, which in the words of Paul Jacobs, have become through their contracts, 'part of the plant government, not only a force for justice but also an integral part of the system of authority needed to operate the plant.' (p4)

The same theme runs through Glaberman's earlier *Punching Out* (1952)<sup>11</sup>, in which workers' control of production is seen as the ultimate goal of these struggles. Indeed we can see a partially worked out critique of the role of the unions in the Johnson-Forest Tendency; Glaberman and others became union representatives, only to reach the conclusion that they were 'enforcing the contract and enforcing the company rules'. 'If you become a committeeman you have an objective role, and no matter who you are, you are an alternative bureaucrat' (a theme later developed by *Socialisme ou Barbarie*). Glaberman considered that workers' self-activity did create the unions and other institutions, which subsequently became bureaucratized and turned against the worker.

The contradictory relationship between workers and unions is evident in *Wartime Strikes – The struggle against the no-strike pledge in the UAW during World War II*<sup>12</sup>, which details the wildcats in the auto plants by the majority of auto workers in defiance of the no-strike pledge that a majority of auto workers had voted for, and also examines the changing composition of the American working class in general and auto workers in particular.

In the 'rank-and-file revolt against both speed-up and the union', the Johnson-Forest Tendency saw a relation between the development of the forces of production and workers' power, which they considered would lead to the socialist revolution and workers' self-management of production. According to Harry Cleaver in *Reading Capital Politically*, the Johnson-Forest Tendency 'recognized the autonomy of the working-class itself, from capital and from its 'official' organizations: the Party and the unions'<sup>13</sup>.

### *Socialisme ou Barbarie*

In France, the organization *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (with a journal of the same name), was undergoing a parallel development. Indeed the two groups were in contact and collaborated on a number of projects. Formed in 1949 by militants leaving the Trotskyist Fourth International, again over the question of the latter's critical defence of the Soviet Union, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* too began to focus attention on the question of the workers' actual experience in the process of production. This was in opposition to the Stalinist practice (of the *Parti Communiste and Confédération Générale du Travail*) of attempting to instrumentalize workers' struggles for the defence of the USSR, or for parliamentary manoeuvres.

In breaking with the objectivism of Marxist 'orthodoxy' which only understood work and the working class in economic terms, and in rejecting the belief that the development of the forces of production would lead automatically to communism, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* promoted instead an activist-oriented and 'non-dogmatic' Marxist theory. They stressed the centrality of the production process and the need for its systematic analysis, a 'work-science with a revolutionary intention' (Claude Lefort in *L'expérience prolétarienne*<sup>14</sup>). The exploration of workers' experience of the production process was fundamental for the reconstruction of an authentic class movement and for the renewal of revolutionary theory, in which 'the greatest force of production, the revolutionary class itself' didn't merely react to objective conditions in some automatic fashion but acted according to the whole ensemble of its experience: 'The history of the proletariat is experience, and this experience has to be understood as a process of self-organization'.

*Socialisme ou Barbarie's* work in describing and analysing the relationship between conditions in the factories; the work process and the behaviour of the workers produced a series published in the journal on *Factory Life* (G. Vivier), *Diary of a worker at Renault, French and North African workers, Agitation at Renault* (D. Mothé)<sup>15</sup>; they also supported an underground paper, *Tribune Ouvrière* at the Renault-Billancourt factory. Much of their work was prompted by the sudden explosion of struggles in the 50s in particular the strike movements of 1953, 1955 and 1957. (In 1953 there were 4 million workers on strike against the Laniel government's austerity measures; in 1955 there were bitter struggles in shipyards and metal-shops of Saint-Nazaire and Nantes – *S ou B* emphasize that these struggles escaped control of the unions and became *autonomous*; in 1957 the strike movement involved much of the tertiary sector.)

The approach used by the group is typified in Henri Simon's *An experience of workers' organisation*<sup>16</sup>, a detailed description of formation of an 'employee's council' at the state insurance firm: 'we wanted to situate this experience in the total framework of the enterprise, and to this end, analyse its structure and the correlated evolution of work conditions

<sup>10</sup> Bewick Editions, Facing Reality 1965

<sup>11</sup> Reprinted by Bewick Editions, Detroit 1973.

<sup>12</sup> Bewick Editions, Detroit 1980.

<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, we find this conception of workers' autonomy to be problematic.

<sup>14</sup> In *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Nr. 11 (November-December 1952).

<sup>15</sup> All of these texts are to be found (in French) in *Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthologie* (Acratie, Mauléon 1985)

<sup>16</sup> 'Une expérience d'organisation ouvrière' in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* nr. 20, Dec 1956-Feb 1957



on the one side, and of the mentality and behaviour of the employees on the other'.

Members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* attempted to systematize the investigation of proletarian experience: Lefort, inspired by the example of *The American Worker* proposed collecting testimonies (*témoignages*) of workers' experiences, in order to gain insight into the specific social relations inside and outside the factory. Areas to be covered included the relations between workers; their relation to their work (their 'productive function' in the factory), to technology and the organization of the production process; their relation to the rationalization measures of the bosses; the division of labour and the hierarchy of wages and functions; and also the workers' knowledge of social organization, their perceptions of their relations with society as a whole and their relation to a proletarian tradition and history. The task of this analysis was to find out if workers articulated a common experience, and if this experience contained new social relations and communist tendencies. *Témoignages* were intended to be a contribution to revolutionary theory as well as to a revolutionary practice. This project was not carried out systematically, but some testimonies were received, and discussions of members of the group with workers were recorded.

The members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* saw their role as both an analytical and an agitational one: Simon reflects on the experience in the state insurance firm: 'The creation of a council of the staff of Assurances Générales-Vie, in a firm with solid implantation of the traditional unions, demonstrates that where there is a nucleus of lucid, patient and resolute militants, employees can regroup on a practical terrain and take into their own hands their own defence.' (Was this the type of result Kolinko were hoping for? Of course there is the important difference that in this case the 'nucleus of militants' didn't come from the outside, but was already working at the firm.)

*Socialisme ou Barbarie* grappled with the dilemma posed by their insistence on workers' autonomous organization on the one hand, and the recuperation of their struggles by the labour bureaucracy on the other: 'Their oscillation between spontaneous revolt and struggle led by the union leaders signifies that workers are searching for a solution to the problems posed by their opposition both to the capitalist bourgeoisie and to the bureaucracy.'

In attempting to resolve these contradictions, tensions arose within the organization over the question of the party. Cornelius Castoriadis<sup>17</sup> envisaged a new party, in opposition to the existing 'degenerated' organizations, bringing together the diffused vanguard of revolutionaries spread out over the country - 'The programme of this organisation should be socialism, embodied in workers' power, the total power of the workers' councils which will realize the workers' management of the firm and of society.'

The 'autonomous' faction led by Lefort on the other hand were sceptical of the need for a party organization: 'The only way in which the proletariat could develop its power was through autonomous forms of organisation. Everything depended on this and not on the party, which was simply a historically determined expression of specific labour experiences and could therefore be superfluous or

even undesirable in other circumstances. This is why *Socialisme ou Barbarie* should not so much concern itself with revolution and the conquest of state power, as with the experiences of the working class in the process of organising itself.'

*Socialisme ou Barbarie's* explorations of objective conditions and subjective experience in the process of production led them to a critique of technology: the splitting up of particular tasks, the conveyor belt, were methods used by management to increase their control over the workers. By exactly prescribing every bodily movement in connection with machines their independence could be further affected. Technology was, therefore, first and foremost class-technology. The deskilling which the changes in the production process brought about also had implications for workers' collective experience: in *Factory Life*, Vivier develops an analysis of the homogenisation of the proletarian condition which to an extent anticipates the later 'mass worker' thesis of the Italian workerists.

The work of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, drawing on that of the Johnson-Forest tendency in the US, can be seen as a precursor/prototype of the workerist inquiry into class composition.

Both these currents saw that the new structure of the labour process (Taylorism, 'Scientific management', Fordism, with work rhythm dictated by machines) left its mark on the daily life and consciousness of the workers; the point for the Johnson-Forest Tendency and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was to study the consequences of these changes for the 'self-organisation' of the workers. Both tendencies envisaged that the new proletariat would develop its power to the extent that it would take over the organization of production.

#### *The Italian workerists*

These two currents in turn influenced the development of inquiry into proletarian experience in the rapidly industrialising Italy of the 1950s and 60s, where young dissidents from the Socialist and Communist Parties initiated a project of attempting to 'apply Marx's critique of political economy.. to unravel the fundamental power relationships of modern class society.. In the process, they sought to confront *Capital* with 'the real study of a real factory', in pursuit of a clearer understanding of the new instances of independent working-class action'<sup>18</sup>.

Particularly the Renault militant Daniel Mothé's diary and *The American Worker* influenced the early workerists' view that there was amongst the workers a permanent, if contradictory, antagonism to the capitalist organization of labour.

Some of these Italian dissident Marxists considered that bourgeois sociology<sup>19</sup> could be utilised in a radical way - and even that sociological inquiry could be the means to establish a new 'organic' relation between intellectuals and working people, based on the joint production of social

<sup>17</sup> aka Paul Cardan

<sup>18</sup> Steve Wright op. cit. p3

<sup>19</sup> Industrial sociology had been developed in the US in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a means of extracting a precise knowledge of the actual production process from the workers using interviews, but, of course, for the improvement of exploitation for the capitalists.



knowledge 'from below'. Romano Alquati however deemed the use of sociology to be merely a 'first approximation to that 'self-research' which the autonomous organization of the working class required.

From the end of the 50s, new waves of struggle were breaking out in the factories of the North, chiefly among the unskilled workers from the South, who were discovering new forms of organisation such as the assembly and the council, and used rolling strikes that went from department to department, the unions were hardly present in these struggles, which were not just for higher wages but against working conditions in general under the new regime of taylorism and the assembly line. It was against this backdrop that the group around Raniero Panzieri began to discuss inquiry. *Quaderni Rossi* was a heterogeneous group; a 'sociological-objectivist' current wanted to analyse the conditions in the factories and used interview-techniques from American industrial sociology. For this current the working class appeared merely as the object of research - the subject/object relation of the Leninist party-concepts was repeated, whereby the party imparts class 'consciousness' to the workers from the outside. On the other hand a more subtle form of Leninism characterized the 'political-interventionist' current of *Quaderni Rossi*, which understood workers' inquiry as a means of organising the workers' struggle. Their intention was that workers would be the subject and object of inquiry at the same time. Starting from the informal class struggle in the factories, the sabotage at the assembly lines, they hoped for the construction of a new workers' party as a function of self-organised workers' autonomy. Workers' inquiry was to aid in this process and was seen as a political concept against the detachment from the class and the reformism of the existing workers' parties and unions. As Asor Rosa was to put it in 1965 in *Classe Operaia*, the journal which succeeded *Quaderni Rossi*: 'If there are reasons why the working class must overthrow and smash the domination of the capitalist system, they certainly cannot be found outside the material, objective characteristics of the class itself'<sup>20</sup>.

Alquati's FIAT studies (started at a time of quiescence at FIAT) and at Olivetti were based on 'co-research' carried out with help of a critical faction of the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL) during the 50s.

These studies, although somewhat journalistic, examined the situation, position and attitudes of the workers in those factories, particularly the technicians. Alquati hoped that inquiry would become *self-inquiry* by the workers' themselves. This conception of inquiry would not see the worker as a mere supplier of information, but would instead try to create a situation where workers themselves are subjects, and not external forces. In reality the few concrete inquiries organised by the group around *Quaderni Rossi* did not live up to this aspiration. In the words of a Kolinko member: 'There was no autonomous workers' inquiry but a contradictory relation of informal, spontaneous workers' autonomy at the assembly lines and some intellectuals, who tried to support that process in favour of a new political organisation. This was only possible because of the existence of spontaneous workers' resistance on one side and the

opening gap between the workers and the historical workers' organisations on the other.'

For Alquati, inquiry was firstly an excuse to create contacts with some workers. Those contacts were intended to facilitate an understanding of the factory and of the subjective situation of workers; this understanding would be useful to the workerists within the concrete organising of workers' struggles and also in relation to conflicts within political organizations. The aim of inquiry was to also uncover the hidden autonomous and spontaneous organization within the factory. *Quaderni Rossi* had always stressed the importance of the 'collective worker'; through inquiry, the group around Alquati hoped to demonstrate that the 'collective worker' did not just exist as the producer of capital, but that it was possible to discover him/her politically and to support him/her in the struggle against capital.

Through interviews and discussions with workers, Alquati and others got a new picture of the working class. Alquati's FIAT study, focusing as it did on the position of the technicians, was strongly imbued with self-management ideology - workers in conversation moved from criticizing their individual job role to questioning the rationality of the firm's division of labour. Alquati saw a new 'figure' in the young technicians who had gone through technical school, who were dissatisfied with the work, who were self-confident and thought they could lead production themselves - and in reality had to perform some simple and repetitive work-task.

By the time of the FIAT wildcats in 1963, when the union was excluded from the direction of the struggle and workers demanded nothing, Alquati had rejected self-management and workers' control as union attempts to bind labour to accumulation. He saw the spontaneity of these types of actions of the workers, along with their 'invisible organization' in the workplace, as consciousness in embryonic form; hence a Party form was still needed (a formal class organization under control of the workers).

In his later Olivetti work, Alquati hinted at the development of the 'mass worker' thesis, with the decomposition of the skilled working-class: 'Alquati now judged the introduction of new machinery as a gauge of the general level and quality of the relations of force between the classes in that moment. With the growing application of Henry Ford's productive innovations to Northern industry during the 1950s, he noted, Frederick Winslow Taylor's goal of 'scientifically' disintegrating the proletariat as a political force had won an important victory'<sup>21</sup>.

The workerists considered that de-skilling and the concentration of unskilled workers in the factories had created a new hegemonic proletarian subject, with a homogenized experience. In contrast to the skilled workers who had earlier fought for control over the production process, the 'mass worker's' work was totally subsumed under capital, which led the new subject to struggle against capital itself, its technical existence.

By the time the class composition of the 'mass worker' had reached its heyday at the end of the sixties, the workerists, many of whom were now organized *within*

<sup>20</sup> 'Quattro note di 'politica culturale'', *Classe Operaia* II(3)

<sup>21</sup> Steve Wright op. cit. p55



*Potere Operaio*, had largely abandoned inquiry<sup>22</sup>, and were focused instead on a more direct form of interventionism in the factories through the workplace rank-and-file committees. For *Potere Operaio* 'the only valid starting point for any theory that sought to be revolutionary lay in the analysis of working-class behaviour in the most advanced sectors of the economy.'

With the defeat of the struggles of the 'mass worker', class composition began to take on new meanings for a current within workerism, as Toni Negri developed his thesis of the *operaio sociale*<sup>23</sup> – 'a new proletariat disseminated throughout society' as a result of the decomposition of the 'mass worker' through restructuring and the 'further massification of abstract labour'. No longer connected to any concrete empirical research in the sphere of production, class composition was divested of its material basis. Not until the end of the seventies did some workerists (the editors of *Primo Maggio*) propose a return to inquiry, but an inquiry which would be obliged to follow the workers outside the factory – for the times were deemed to be over when 'the factory produced politics, and the inquiry was struggle'.

#### *Wildcat, Kolinko, and the exhumation of inquiry*

The emergence of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Quaderni Rossi* was inextricably linked to the new forms of production, the formation of a new working-class, new forms of struggle. In each of these cases the inquiry (using this term loosely) was predicated on and prompted by a general situation of struggles of workers in the workplace (although it is true that Alquati hoped to stir up antagonism with his inquiry at Fiat at time of relative quiescence there).

In contrast, it is an interesting irony that Kolinko, in deciding to resurrect the practice of workers' inquiry, have inverted the situation (put the cart before the horse perhaps) – it seems they are now attempting to use the inquiry as a radical tool, even perhaps as a voluntaristic attempt to prompt struggle, at time of low class mobilisation. It has been argued that workers' inquiry only made sense in the time of the 'mass-worker', when the working-class was reaching the height of its empowerment and homogeneity within capitalism; according to this view, workers' inquiries were a product of their time, and were subsequently overtaken by events, as the industrial struggles of the late 60s resulted in the defeat of the working class. Kolinko would beg to differ, and describe their goals as follows: 'Our aim now is to understand the real conditions within the sphere of exploitation and to allow us to realize the possibilities and starting points of new struggles in order to be able to support them.'

Kolinko's project in some ways appears to be an attempt to return to classical workerism, an updated version of workers' inquiry without the Leninism or self-managementism of the earlier currents (each of the

tendencies Johnson-Forest, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and *operaismo* were to some extent split along these lines).

But what led Kolinko to their inquiry project? Here we trace the trajectory of German Wildcat in the 70s and 80s, their 'turn to theory' in the 90s, and the emergence of Kolinko as an off-shoot involving some younger Wildcat members.

Wildcat, which could be described as an *operaismo*-influenced network (and journal of the same name), based its work in following and analysing workplace and social struggles, always with the emphasis on autonomous working-class activity outside and against the unions (hence the name). Through detailed examinations of the concrete experience of the class, an example of which is the pamphlet *Class Struggle In A German Town*<sup>24</sup>, Wildcat hoped to facilitate a clearer understanding of actual class relations. Their 'militant research' involved members getting jobs in the same workplace in order to agitate, and publishing reports on the situation of struggles in their workplaces. Wildcat, with their connections to the 'social-revolutionary' wing of the autonomous movement<sup>25</sup>, were part of the wider 'jobbers' scene, in which militants would get precarious jobs: 'jobbing' was a way of doing 'any old shitty job for a short time, in order then to have time for ourselves, for political struggle and for pleasure.'<sup>26</sup> There was the idea in this scene that the precarious, highly mobile worker had the potential to be a new (revolutionary) subject. By the early 90s, with the fall of the Berlin wall<sup>27</sup>, the collapse of the radical left/*autonomen* and the self-conscious practice of 'jobbing'<sup>28</sup>, and the apparent social peace at the point of production, Wildcat members began to question the validity of the journal as its circulation fell. Feeling the need for a process of theoretical clarification in the face of this new situation, Wildcat ceased publishing the journal and initiated instead an internal theoretical review, *Wildcat Zirkular*.<sup>29</sup>

During their 'retreat into theory', Wildcat continued to consider the question of militant research, and in 1995 described the tasks of a new inquiry as follows: 'Now a collective work of inquiry has to start that tries to find out what the world-wide remaking of the proletariat will look like. Firstly, there has to be the verification of this hypothesis through many discussions with workers in the modern factory, casual employees, immigrants, so-called self-employed workers etc. Secondly, we need to develop a precise terminology. And thirdly, this would mean to

<sup>24</sup> The pamphlet describes the experience of Wildcat members working in the construction of a nuclear power plant. See [http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/thekla/11/t11e\\_kkp.htm](http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/thekla/11/t11e_kkp.htm)

<sup>25</sup> That is, the 'better' wing of the *autonomen*, the other wing being the anti-imperialists who spent much time supporting the struggles of the Red Army Faction

<sup>26</sup> From Wildcat's 'Open Letter to John Holloway' at [http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/zirkular/39/z39e\\_hol.htm](http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/zirkular/39/z39e_hol.htm)

<sup>27</sup> Many in the German radical left had envisaged an upswing in struggles after reunification, as East German workers found their job security and conditions eroded.

<sup>28</sup> Taking precarious jobs had become a necessity rather than a choice for many.

<sup>29</sup> 2003 marked the return of the *Wildcat* journal, a decision prompted by the emergence of the 'anti-globalization movement', increasing interest in the 'social question' and an influx of young members to the loose network around Wildcat.

<sup>22</sup> An exception was 'Porto Marghera: An Analysis of Workers' Struggles and the Capitalists' Attempts to Restructure the Chemical Industry, a Workers' Inquiry' (in *Potere Operaio* Nov 1971)

<sup>23</sup> The 'socialized' worker. Later still this category came to be associated with the 'immaterial labour' of computer programmers etc.



actively intervene through initiatives of struggle and organising attempts in order to speed up the process of understanding (realisation) and to uncover the hidden tendency towards communism, that go along with the class movements.<sup>30</sup>

After several years of theoretical discussion, Kolinko decided in 1999 to take this task upon themselves. Restructuring and the emergence of the 'new economy' had particularly affected the Ruhr area, where the group was based. The group's aim was to investigate the hypothesis of a new capitalist cycle of accumulation based on the 'new economy', a corresponding reorganisation of work and potentially a new cycle of struggles. Kolinko's decision to conduct a workers' inquiry in call centres perhaps reflected some ideas current a few years ago that call centres might be the new factories, with their concentration of many semi- or unskilled casualized workers under one roof, and that a new proletarian subject might be about to emerge.

Some four decades earlier in Italy the circle around Alquati had considered that 'a whole series of objective and subjective processes were unfolding at FIAT such as to lay the basis for a resurgence of class struggle within the firm'.<sup>31</sup> It seems Kolinko thought there was the possibility of an analogous situation developing in the call centres, which themselves were the result of 'technical recomposition' in banking, trade, insurance, telecoms, and taylorisation of work in these sectors etc. This restructuring was intended to defeat the entrenched workforce in these sectors and break certain behaviours or positions of workers, in order to intensify exploitation through flexibilisation, casualisation, monitoring and control. The Citibank strike in Bochum at the end of 1998 against the relocation of its call centre seemed to Kolinko to hold some promise of such a new cycle of struggles..all that remained was to launch an inquiry..

### Problems of worker's inquiry as revolutionary practice

Kolinko's approach to workers' inquiry consisted of getting jobs in call centres, using questionnaires to attempt to stimulate discussion, and leaflets to agitate. Some of the interviews were carried out in order to get information about work organization, machinery, hierarchy, workers' behaviour, and others with the focus on discussion and agitation, and still others for exchange of information with other workplaces; for each of these interviews they wrote questionnaires which they hoped would be taken up by other workers: 'Most important here is that interviews don't remain a one-sided thing but become a joint discussion and even a "self-inquiry" where others use the questionnaires in their sectors and exchange the results of the discussions.'

Although Kolinko only carried out a few interviews with a dozen other workers, their inquiry project undoubtedly had some merits. Firstly, although as Kolinko readily admit the interventions through questionnaires and leaflets often did not have the desired impact, there were isolated successes in their own terms, as the following report from Medion in Muelheim suggests: 'The first hotline-leaflet

made big waves at Medion. Everywhere in the company workers started discussing, even people who did not know each other before' (p162). The report goes on to say that although these discussions ebbed away, more favourable conditions were introduced by management soon after; the report leaves open the question of whether the hotline-leaflet and the discussions it provoked had an influence in the management decision.

Secondly, as members of the group report, the process of inquiry did cause the people involved to work through their ideas in relation to capital and class struggle through many hours of discussion, and in 'relating to actual situations of exploitation in the workplace, as workers'.

Thirdly, the inquiry project was asking important questions of class composition, the changing relations of exploitation through restructuring and the introduction of new technology, the connection between workers in the work process, and the nature of class struggle: 'Inquiry means understanding the context between the daily cooperation of the workers and their forms of struggle and finding the new (communist) sociality within'. (p10)

*Hotlines* is useful for its detailed description and analysis of the restructuring in different sectors of the sphere of circulation which has given rise to call centre phenomenon, and the accompanying changes in work relations, the deskilling, the relationship between workers and between workers and machinery. Drawing upon Panzieri's critique of capitalist technology, Kolinko examine the use of machinery and technology in the labour process in relation to class behaviour, for rationalising production and as authoritarian subjugation of living labour. We would say that as a critique of existing relations in call centres, *Hotlines* is useful.

Ultimately, however, in its own terms the Kolinko project was frustrated by the lack of struggles in their chosen sector; the 'new factories', with their concentration of workers under one roof, failed to throw up the struggles of the 'mass worker' on the assembly line. The few struggles that Kolinko report from the call centres were mainly defensive ones against worsening pay and conditions and lay-offs as companies restructured. The scenario is one of political decomposition in the workplace, without the long hoped-for recomposition through new movements..

Kolinko's evaluation of the lack of struggles in call centres betrays a voluntarism and a belief that the workers have not learnt how to struggle properly: 'So far the workers in call centres have not found "their" form of struggle, one that uses the possibilities that call centres are centres of communication. Other workers – for example in car factories – needed a generation to learn to use the assembly line for the coordination of strikes and sabotage. Do we want to wait that long?' (p128) Kolinko evidently believed that inquiry might provide a short-cut, and yet ultimately they are disappointed: 'We asked ourselves, what is the point in leaflets and other kinds of interventions at all if there is no workers' self-activity to refer to? We don't think that interventions in a period of relatively few struggles inevitably descend into vanguardism or unionism, but they do remain on the outside. This could be the reason why the inquiry stayed in our hands and did not become a 'workers' self-inquiry', where we could discuss the political content of everyday working life with other workers, and arrive at a

<sup>30</sup> In 'Renaissance des Operaismus?' - Wildcat Nr. 64, March 1995  
<http://www.wildcat-www.de/wildcat/64/w64opera.htm>

<sup>31</sup> Steve Wright op.cit. p47



common strategy for developing the class struggle.' Was it naïve of Kolinko to believe that their inquiry project would be well received by the call-centre workers?

Members of Kolinko complain that critiques of the call centre project are limited to criticisms on a theoretical, or worse ideological level, and that there is little discussion of the actual experience and the methods used in the inquiry. If we devote little attention in this article to the minutiae of inquiry techniques, it is because we do not believe the problems encountered by Kolinko were problems of method – rather they were problems of militant inquiry *per se*.

Kolinko, borrowing heavily from workerism/autonomism, make a critique of Leninism, the party form, the unions, syndicalism, rank-and-file ism, councilism, self-management etc, privileging instead workers' self-activity; they problematise the question of 'consciousness'. "Political consciousness", the consciousness to confront capital as a class, cannot be brought to the workers from outside, but can only develop in the struggle itself.<sup>32</sup>

Yet in spite of their stated positions, we would argue that they fall into trap of attempting to bring 'consciousness' to the class through the veiled form of the inquiry. The questionnaire, with its didactic, at times even patronising questioning seems intended as a spark of consciousness. Sometimes there is a sense that the questionnaire is almost manipulative; or that the 'right' answers are being elicited, as when a teacher tries to guide pupils to giving the correct response by prompt-feeding. There could be a link here with certain management techniques involving use of questionnaires to make workers feel included, listened to. Both management and revolutionaries in a sense are trying to get the workers to do what they want them to do. So there is a sense in which Kolinko, while criticising Leninist vanguardism (for what they want the workers to do is to self-organise!), are almost attempting to 'get in through the back door', anti-Leninist alibi at the ready, with a more subtle or disguised form of consciousness-raising by questionnaire.

Their role is seen as 'role supporting workers' self-reflection and their discussion through leaflets, interviews and other forms of intervention and making proposals'. Revealingly, we are told: 'All in all, the questionnaire did not produce a "representative" result. We don't even know if the questionnaire *opened up the consciousness*<sup>33</sup> or the eyes of comrades in other call centres.' (p16)

*Hotlines* is riven with contradictions, and a sense of self-criticism pervades the book; ultimately, though, the self-criticisms are not taken on board, or if they are, they seem to be used as alibis for continuing with a militant project. Kolinko speak of agitation, well-aimed interventions, but also say 'We know ... that we cannot initiate struggles or a movement'. Kolinko's self-criticism would seem to be the pre-emptive self-defence of the militant.

Kolinko argue that workers' inquiry is also process of self-inquiry, that they ask themselves the same questions as they ask other workers, and that the process should be a mutual one of discussion and exchange of ideas and

understanding. Yet in their series of *hotlines* leaflets handed out at call centres, many of these questions are answered. In fact Kolinko describe the problem of how to make the connection between concrete struggles and totality in their leaflets without *teaching* the workers.

As we have seen, Kolinko hoped that their inquiry would stimulate call-centre workers to carry out their own 'self-inquiry'. As we have seen, this was also the goal of some of the early Italian workerists. However there is something of a 'false consciousness' in this self-inquiry ideal – actually workers don't need to do an inquiry, not even a 'self-inquiry': the problem is not so much that workers are not aware of their situation of exploitation; the question is more what they can do about it...

Kolinko write: 'only as part of a movement, where struggling workers themselves analyse their conditions and connections, can the inquiry become a joint search for a new world..' The implication here is that workers are failing to do this at the moment, that they are struggling blindly, and need to be taught how to see by means of the inquiry.

Kolinko criticise the Italian workerists for failing to leave behind the subject/object relation of Leninist party concepts, whereby the party teaches the workers class 'consciousness' from the outside. In Kolinko's conception, inquiry as intervention or 'self-inquiry' is intended to create a situation where workers are subjects, yet we could argue that even this interventionism to stimulate self-activity bears a Leninist residue. Kolinko describe one of the desired functions of their questionnaire for discussion and agitation as follows: 'The questionnaire is also a support while confronting the workers with their behaviour, while searching for the break-up points<sup>34</sup> and rebellious moments..' It would seem that Kolinko see themselves as revolutionary mentors.

It might be argued that inquiry is rooted in the old social democratic or Leninist conception that by themselves, workers lack 'consciousness'. Only in the case of Kolinko's inquiry, it seems that the problem is conceived to be that the workers don't know how to organize themselves and that the militant has an indispensable role in stimulating discussions so that the workers themselves can produce 'consciousness'.

As one member of Kolinko has remarked, *Quaderni Rossi* did not organize many concrete inquiries – and most of them from the outside. They did not overcome the division between the 'subjects' and the 'objects' of the inquiry. But as Kolinko acknowledge, the call centre project also failed to overcome this division. Kolinko are at pains to perfect the technique of inquiry with a view to solving these problems; yet it would seem that these problems are inherent to inquiry itself, and that self-inquiry is a chimera.

In practice the lengthy questionnaires (156 questions in the 'facts and overview' questionnaire!) probably do not solve the problems of social communication, as attested to by the embarrassment some Kolinko members have reported when trying to get a fellow worker to answer them; in fact the questionnaire, reminiscent of the politics of democracy, opinion polls, and referendums would probably appear to most people quite an artificial and alienated form of communication. A related problem is that most workers are probably not interested in answering questions about

<sup>32</sup> Kolinko paper on class composition – [www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e\\_klazu.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e_klazu.htm)

<sup>33</sup> Our emphasis

<sup>34</sup> Points of conflict?



work; they would just like to get away from work. One of the approaches used was to invite work-mates to go for a drink after work; one can imagine they might be less than enthusiastic to talk shop.

In their self-critical evaluation of the project, Kolinko acknowledge some of these problems: 'We have been asked if we benefited from the questionnaire and the interviews. In the beginning we had the idea that a political discussion could come about through the reciprocal interviews with other workers in which the daily organisation of work is criticised. But we only did a few interviews with a dozen other workers so it is hard to answer the question.

We mostly got to know these 'other workers' through political contacts rather than at work. During the interviews we had some discussions but there were just too many questions.'(p16); 'Some of us preferred to have conversations at work instead of interviews...' (p192).

These problems of communication relate to the unease which some Kolinko members have reported about the inquiry; should they openly admit that they are there to agitate, or not? If they do, then they risk being treated with the same contempt that many workers reserve for leftist militants; if they don't then there is something dishonest about the relation between inquirer and the other workers. They are damned if they do, and damned if they don't.

Kolinko certainly couch the project of inquiry in ambitious terms: 'That's how we perceive our inquiry and intervention in call centres in the last three years: as a revolutionary project in a specific sector that tries to understand and criticize the totality of capitalist relations.' (p10).

But does worker's inquiry correspond to the crisis of the militant, the need to fill the gap in practice through 'proletarian intervention' (p14)? Any sense that workers' inquiry could kick-start struggle in call-centres is soon dispelled for the members of Kolinko; they recognise the danger of 'trying to make up for the workers' passivity through our own activism' (p23).

Here we are into the realm of the psychology of the militant, where the subjective needs of the activist perhaps diverge from those of (other) proletarians. Interestingly, Kolinko say 'we ourselves had the idea that "inquiry" would be a "liberation" for us' (p14). The inquiry helps to create an image of the inquirers as people who are really doing something, who can list their connections to the class and adopt the role of the revolutionary militant worker. Revolutionaries need to feel connected to the class! Inquiry represents for the militant an attempt to overcome the dichotomy between theory and practice.

There might be something artificial about militants choosing to work in call-centres - Kolinko talk of 'throwing ourselves into the sweatshops of the New Economy' (p10), which appears to be at odds with their stated goal of overcoming 'the leftist culture of...self-sacrifice'. This practice could create the situation whereby militants stay in job situations which they would otherwise try to escape (by looking for a less boring job for example, or claiming unemployment benefit) for the sake of the political project. In this way a tension can arise through the separation of proletarian needs and political needs.

In recommending workers' inquiry, Kolinko suggest that prospective inquirers should evaluate where struggles are happening and focus on those sectors. As militants the prime need is to be involved in struggle (or struggle-chasing). They don't recommend inquiries where you happen to be working: 'Where you are at the moment is mainly by chance and it does not make much sense to hang around in some sector where nothing is happening or where there are no conflicts.'

This particular need immediately separates the militant from other proletarians, and inevitably creates a distorted relationship between militants and other workers.

The particular needs of the militant as opposed to Joe(sephine) Prole - are to be involved in struggle. Proletarians are indifferent to the labour they perform, and seek the job with the best pay and conditions. Not so the militant, who seeks the job with the best prospects of struggle.

Inquiry might be useful in terms of shedding some light on the reality of the workplace, but in the renewed interest in workers' inquiry as a political practice, is there an attempt to turn it into a philosopher's stone of revolutionary intervention?

#### *The role of the revolutionary group*

So how do Kolinko conceive of their own role as a revolutionary group? The following remarks<sup>35</sup> give us a clear idea: 'In order to find an answer to "what makes struggles revolutionary?" we need to discuss the history of the struggles... but that's not enough: we need to investigate class reality in the sphere of exploitation and be present in the conflicts ourselves...Of course, not by playing some kind of "revolutionary vanguard". History shows that their intervention rather played the role of disciplining the struggles, leading them towards some kind of arrangement within capitalist relations by re-establishing hierarchies and the law of value. Still, we don't want to wait for the "inevitable" historical outcome of class struggle - nothing is inevitable if we understand capitalism as a relation/antagonism - but get involved, struggle ourselves.' The revolutionary group's role, then, is to intervene in struggles without being a vanguard. Inquiry provides Kolinko with a vehicle for their intervention.

But the question needs to be posed as to why worker's inquiry is necessary. To establish connections between struggles in different workplaces? We can compare here ICO's<sup>36</sup> self-ascribed role of class postman, *Precari Nati*'s idea of the crucial role of the revolutionary group<sup>37</sup>, versus *Echanges et Mouvement*'s and other councilists' extreme caution not to intervene in any way, so as not to contaminate a class movement. Kolinko attempt to steer a middle course

<sup>35</sup> From an informal Kolinko presentation

<sup>36</sup> *Informations et Correspondance Ouvrières* - an offshoot from *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

<sup>37</sup> *Precari Nati* (i.e. 'born precarious'), an Italian group influenced by the German/Dutch Left, and which later became CRAC (Research Centre for Communist Action), emphasized that they didn't want to lead the class, but saw a vital role for themselves as a conduit for the exchange of information between groups of workers. It could be argued that there is a relation between the notion of the role of the revolutionary group and a positive conception of class (essentialism).



between a vanguardist concept of organization/intervention and the non-interventionism of the councilists; they want to intervene in order to promote the self-activity of workers. Can the circle be squared?

Connections between workplaces (and between the spheres of production and the reproduction of labour-power) if they are made, are made at times of class struggle, when movements become socialised. The attempt to fill the gap in practice, to make up for the lack of class struggle arguably corresponds to the fetishisation of worker's inquiry as radical tool.

*The question of separation:*

Kolinko attempt to overcome theoretically the problem of separation: 'The relation to other exploited workers is neither "tactical" - as between functionaries and a revolutionary subject - nor "enlightening".' Yet there still seems to be on their part a willingness to adopt the identity and role of *revolutionary*: 'revolutionary organising is not "organising of other workers" but of revolutionaries who *know their way*<sup>38</sup> in the sphere of exploitation and together look for tendencies of a revolutionary movement'.

'We cannot instigate struggles but we can summarise the most advanced discussions, the weak points of capitalist control and critique the workers. And we can generalize these experiences and circulate them within the sphere of exploitation. The relation between revolutionaries and workers is that of a collective process: where is the possibility of workers' power and self-liberation in the daily experiences of exploitation?'<sup>39</sup> A collective process, then, but with a division of labour - with the revolutionaries acting as the intellect of the class and having the role of admonishing the workers when they don't behave?

Do Kolinko see themselves as militants going in from the outside? Kolinko would argue that workers are far from homogeneous, and they merely form another group within the workplace; they are there to earn money just like everybody else. Kolinko see themselves as both workers and intellectuals/theorists unlike the separation in *The American Worker*.

However we would argue that as one of the motivations for workers' inquiry is to 'join the working class' and 'get in touch with the workers', inquiry proceeds from the stand-point of separation.

Kolinko have this need to understand what is going on, not just in one sector, but everywhere (an understandable urge..); they propose that like-minded groups establish inquiries in strategic sectors where struggles are occurring, and that these groups establish a network on a worldwide basis. One has the impression that while engaging in their own particular inquiry, they simultaneously want to get the whole picture almost like revolutionary strategists standing outside the battlefield of class struggle.

A common counter to many of these arguments is that to reach these conclusions can only lead to a sort of 'ultra-left' paralysis, where armchair theorists, in the absence of a practice, 'disappear up their own arses'. Yet we would argue that intervention and non-intervention are both

premised on a separation - the separation of the revolutionary group which sees itself as being apart from the class or the class struggle in some way.

**Problems of the 'ultra-left' critique of unions and conceptions of class: 'passivity of the class' vs 'class autonomy'**

*A movement which is broken is breakable.*

Kolinko are exasperated by the failure of call-centre workers to act independently of unions and works councils, except on an individual basis (eg tricks to skive off). Kolinko document numerous examples of struggles which are negotiated away by unions and works councils, with negligible gains for the workers. It is possible that a rigid anti-union position has a certain validity in the context of the German corporatist 'social partnership' between the state, employers and unions. However the critique of the recuperative role of unions has a tendency to become ideological with 'ultra-left' groups; a common characterisation of the role of the unions as functionaries of capital is that they act as a 'safety-valve' to dissipate the revolutionary energy of an otherwise rebellious class; this conception runs the risk of not understanding the process of struggle. The class has a critique of the unions when it is in a position to have one - i.e. through struggles and positions of relative strength. There is a danger of seeing workers as a dumb passive mass duped by the unions. This is a common contradiction of many 'ultra-left' analyses, which seek to differentiate a pure, autonomous class from the 'external' institutions of the workers' movement (unions, leftist parties), and in so doing, end up concluding that the class has been duped by the ideology of these external forces.

We would argue that Kolinko's critique of the unions and privileging of 'self-activity', autonomous organizing, and wildcat strikes reflects such an 'ultra-left' ideological position; this position freezes the high points of class struggle, when the balance of forces is such that it is in workers' collective interests to act outside or against the unions, and seeks to preserve them as principles or measures by which it judges the present situation. In our experience the attitude of workers to unions varies: some are relatively pro-union, others anti-union, some both at the same time or both but in different situations, and many are indifferent; yet in concrete situations of disputes, their attitude to the union is more likely to be based on practical considerations, rather than ideological ones - their criterion is more likely to be whether something is to be gained by following the union, or alternatively by acting outside the union. In contrast the 'ultra-left' critique of the unions doesn't relate to practical situations as they present themselves. However this is not to take the romantic view that 'the workers are always right' or that they are not atomized. It is more the case that in the absence of a generalized situation of struggle, workers feel that their possibilities are more limited; we would argue that this does not necessarily indicate a lack of 'class consciousness'.

In developing their notion of class autonomy, Kolinko place much emphasis on the *collective worker* and cooperation in the labour process - they see in the network of collectivity of workers a latent strength which could be turned against capital. However some have criticized the idea

<sup>38</sup> Our emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Kolinko, 'The Subversion of Everyday Life', October 1999 [http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e\\_kosub.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e_kosub.htm)



of the possibility of any workers' autonomy within or against capital: according to this criticism the cooperation between workers in production should not be understood as something appropriated by capital, and hence as something which workers could reappropriate for themselves, for it is capital which brings together the workers in the capitalist production process. This is not to deny of course that alienated labour engenders an antagonism which is expressed in class struggle.

We would argue that the notion of autonomy fails to describe the contradictory existence of the working class within capitalism. This contradiction is neatly expressed by Sandro Studer<sup>40</sup> who argues for the need to examine 'the daily relationship between workers and productive forces which is always an ambiguous relationship, where both the acceptance and refusal of capitalist labour coexist, where workers' passive objectification and subjective (collective) resistance coexist within the subsumption of labour-power to the productive process.'

### Conclusion

The inquiry project carried out by Kolinko has the merit of giving an insight into the situation in call centres in the Ruhr. But in *Hotlines* there is perhaps a lack of a theoretical analysis of the reasons for the low level of collective struggles on the part of the workers and the absence of a political recomposition to accompany the new 'technical composition' in call centres. And if we broaden the question, how can we account for the failure of a 'new subject' to emerge from capitalist restructuring? Wildcat's hypothesis of a worldwide remaking of the proletariat for the time being remains unverified. If inquiry were generalized to a worldwide level, we would certainly be interested to read the results!

For the time being, workers' inquiry might be useful, perhaps for the people engaged in it ('revolutionaries'<sup>41</sup> with a burning urge to 'do something') and people like ourselves ('revolutionaries'/bohemian drop-outs/doleyscum, most of whom have hardly ever had a proper proletarian job), who might be interested in reading

about the situation in the call-centres for example. Attempts to sell the book to people who actually work in call centres have probably been less successful.

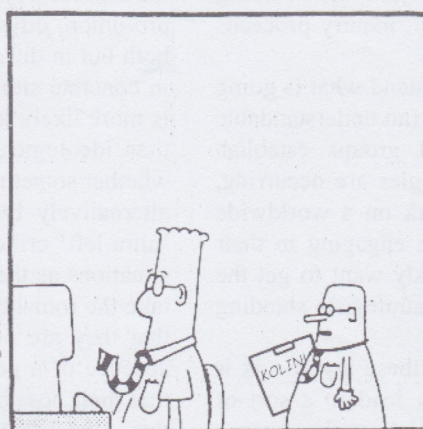
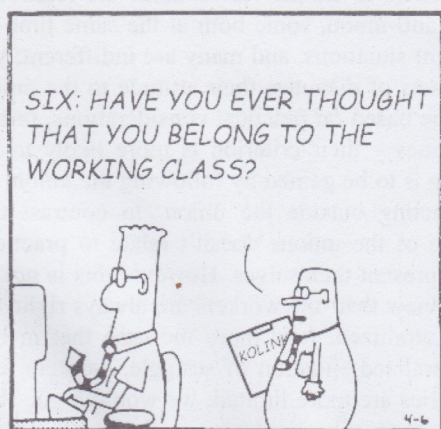
As a vehicle for political 'intervention', we would argue that inquiry is doomed to failure<sup>42</sup>. As we have seen, Kolinko, following the Italian workerists, attempt to construct a third way between sociology and Leninist militancy with their notion of 'self-inquiry'; unfortunately their project seems to confirm that there is no possibility of such a third way.

*Hotlines* ends with something of an ambitious proposal: they want to have an overview of the international situation of the class. In arguing for 'revolutionary' groups to follow their example and carry out inquiries and interventions, both regionally and internationally, Kolinko envisage 'nuclei' (p130) exchanging information about struggles in different areas and sectors; the use of the term 'nuclei' here is revealing; we would argue it is based on a conception of the role of the revolutionary minority in dynamising struggles. Kolinko seem to want to overcome the limits of current struggles and the separation and fragmentation of workers through the planned intervention of 'revolutionaries'. It is almost as if workers' inquiry is to substitute for the organic development of struggles and social movements. Kolinko envisage playing a pro-active role in the linking of struggles beyond sectional and national boundaries.

It is curious that having acknowledged the failure of their own project, Kolinko now seek to extend it on a grand scale.

Perhaps a sign of the limited success of the workers' inquiry project is that instead of doing it, Kolinko are now doing lecture tours and book launches and proselytising – 'we've got something to tell you'<sup>43</sup>.

If this review seems a little harsh, it is not out a motivation to rubbish our comrades' activity – after all, we can't offer a better alternative of 'something to do' at the present time...other than participate in the class struggle as it affects us.



<sup>40</sup> In 'Per un'alternativa al leninismo. Sul rifiuto operaio della 'coscienza esterna', *Metropolis* 1, Oct 1977

<sup>41</sup> We problematise the term 'revolutionaries' here, and the tendency to adopt a 'revolutionary' identity or positions in the absence of the real movement which abolishes capitalism.

<sup>42</sup> Indeed we would argue that 'intervention' *per se* is doomed to failure and that to ask 'what is to be done?' is to pose the wrong question...

<sup>43</sup> This is the title of the first chapter of *Hotlines*



## **Aufheben**

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We have put this collection of articles together because we feel that each of them serves as an important contribution to a confrontation with and critique of some of the prevailing currents in the political debate over how to take new working class struggles forward. This collection does not necessarily reflect a common project among the different groups. Nevertheless, you will find some common elements in the groups' perspectives - such as the refusal of work as a basic element of working class struggle, and the conviction that working class emancipation will come from working class self-activity not from mediators such as trade unions which seek accommodation with capital and the state. The kind of radical-reformist strategies we are attacking here are likely to re-emerge in different guises again and again until the link between the struggle to mitigate alienation and the struggle against alienation itself is finally realized and transcended, and human history can at last begin.

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## **Aufheben**

(past tense: *hob auf*; past participle: *aufgehoben*; noun: *Aufhebung*)

There is no adequate English equivalent to the German word *Aufheben*. In German it can mean 'to pick up', 'to raise', 'to keep', 'to preserve', but also 'to end', 'to abolish', 'to annul'. Hegel exploited this duality of meaning to describe the dialectical process whereby a higher form of thought or being supersedes a lower form, while at the same time 'preserving' its 'moments of truth'. The proletariat's revolutionary negation of capitalism, communism, is an instance of this dialectical movement of supersession, as is the theoretical expression of this movement in the method of critique developed by Marx.